

THE INFERENTIAL NARRATOR IN THE POETRY
OF JOHN CROWE RANSOM

By

DONALD DAVID DUFFY, JR.

Bachelor of Arts in Education
Central State College
Edmond, Oklahoma
1960

Master of Arts
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1963

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College
of the Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
August, 1969

OKLAHOMA
STATE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY
NOV 5 1969

THE INFERENTIAL NARRATOR IN THE POETRY
OF JOHN CROWE RANSOM

Thesis Approved:

Samuel H. Woodr. Jr.
Thesis Adviser

Bernard L. Seldin

John W. Mott

Donald Wilburn

Robert V. Alciatore

D. D. Durham
Dean of the Graduate College

729913

PREFACE

To facilitate identification of the sources of poems, the following system of abbreviations will be used in this study: a parenthetical CF will denote poems which originally appeared in Chills and Fever (1924); TGB will indicate those from Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927). The discussion and excerpts of those poems anthologized in Ransom's three collected editions will be based on the 1963 edition of Selected Poems, abbreviated SP, which includes all the poems that appeared in the 1945 Selected Poems and the 1955 Poems and Essays. To illustrate, (CF, SP) following a poem means that it originally appeared in Chills and Fever and was also chosen for the 1963 Selected Poems.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the assistance and guidance given me by my committee chairman, Dr. Samuel H. Woods, Jr., whose depth of training and helpful comments were invaluable. This thesis also profited from the judgment and constructive criticism of Drs. Robert Alciatore, Bernard Belden, John Milstead, and D. Judson Milburn.

I should also like to thank the Oklahoma State University library staff for its assistance, especially the interlibrary loan service, which diligently tracked down several hard-to-find books.

In addition, I owe a debt to my wife for her patience and support during my past three years in graduate school.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. RANSOM AND THE NARRATOR DEVICE: BACKGROUNDS.	1
II. <u>POEMS ABOUT GOD</u> : THE SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC VOICE	16
III. THE "UNSELECTED" POEMS.	37
IV. THE SELECTED POEMS,	68
V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	121
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.	130

CHAPTER I

RANSOM AND THE NARRATOR DEVICE: BACKGROUNDS

In his book which ably systematizes and elaborates persona theory, George Wright in The Poet in the Poem (1960) remarks that a study of personae "quickly leads the student into the structural bases of poetry."¹ Rebecca Parkin asserts that "the reward of examining the function of the speaker . . . is that, like the analysis of any part of a poem, it leads to a clearer and fuller understanding of the whole."² The device of a "dramatically conceived communicator" is present in all poetry, she argues, and "is, in fact, an indispensable condition under which every poem functions."³ This study proposes, therefore, examining the narrator device in the poetry of John Crowe Ransom and should contribute ultimately to insights and understanding of the whole body of his poetry.

As a substitute for the word persona this study will use Vivienne Koch's closely synonymous term inferential narrator, which is preferable because it avoids confusion with dramatis personae and also because it distinguishes clearly between the poetic narrator (who in Ransom's poetry is often one of the participants in the dramatic situation) and the other characters in the poem, the term persona failing to make such distinction. Most importantly, however, inferential narrator implies that the narrator is to be deduced from the work itself--it implies a focus of attention on the specific poem. Persona, however, has the

association with the mask through which the poet speaks, and the focus inadvertently seems to be on the biography of the poet. Since the critical method in this study is more formalistic than biographical, inferential narrator is more suitable.

Even a first reading of Ransom's poetry, beginning with Poems About God (1919) and proceeding to Selected Poems (1963), shows that in at least three-quarters of the poems an "I" narrator appears. In the earliest volume Ransom's first-person narrator, as Vivienne Koch in "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" has noted, "savored of a naive identification with his materials."⁴ Yet by the time of Chills and Fever (1924) and Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927) there had developed a sophisticated narrator whose tone, Miss Koch says, "is usually that of ironic detachment."⁵ That such a narrator suffuses the whole of Ransom's poetry and is a major device receives support from John Bradbury's essay "Ransom as a Poet": "The primary distinction of this poetry is one, not of philosophy, but of flavor or personality. . . . A complete and integrated personality develops through Ransom's work . . ."⁶ By basing his poems "often on a kind of narrative situation . . . a situation that the prose fictionist could work with"⁷ and by keying his work "to a speaking rather than a singing voice,"⁸ Ransom has, one might conclude, deliberately sought to emphasize the narrator's role. Since several critics have recognized the importance of a narrative personality in Ransom's poetry (though only Vivienne Koch has devoted more than a passing reference to it), an extended study of such a personality seems appropriate.

Narrator theoreticians all point out that the persona or mask is not a device of deliberate deception, nor is it merely a thin costume

beneath which the patient biographer can find the "true man"; rather, scholars and critics have come to realize that the narrator is one of the prime resources of technique which enable the poet or prose writer to detach himself from and to discover his material objectively (see Mark Schorer's essay "Technique as Discovery" for illuminating comments on the relationship between personae and point of view in the novel⁹). As Wright notes, the persona or mask is "clearly intended to reveal more than it hides, to affirm more than it obscures";¹⁰ it becomes a means of presenting "revelations of more significant aspects of reality."¹¹

Beyond the universally recognized function of providing the author with a fresh vantage point, the narrator device offers, according to Rebecca Parkin, the following five rhetorical ends:

1. Unity, because the dramatic speaker is ordinarily not changed within a given poem.
2. Objectivity, because the device enables the poet to shed the trammels of his own personality.
3. Maximum relevancy of viewpoint, because in an effective poem the issue is seen through the eyes of the most interesting and relevant dramatic personality that can be brought to bear on the situation.
4. Dramatic tension and particularity, because the speaker is a concrete individual in a particular situation which contains an element of conflict. That is, the speaker is presented as a person reacting to some aspect of the universe and trying, by the device of persuasive rhetoric, to induce his implied audience to react as he does or at least to understand his reaction.
5. Identification with a specific ideological convention, because, since it involves as a rule delimitation in time and space, it permits ellipsis and promotes compression. . . .¹²

Though this list was formulated with Pope principally in mind, it would seem to cover well the rhetorical advantages of the narrator device in

modern poets, including Ransom.

The range of narrator technique perhaps should be indicated at this point. At one end is the romantic position (epitomized by Wordsworth) in which there exists a close identification of the artist and his narrator. At the other extreme is the modernist attitude (advocated and practiced by T. S. Eliot) which argues for the complete depersonalization of the poet's personality in his art.

The narrators of Ransom's mature poetry clearly are closer to the side of the modernists than to the romantics, and it is also true that it is the "ordered experience of the poem"¹³ and not the narrator's experience that is primary. However, this study will attempt to show that the place at which Ransom applies the basic aesthetic distance which is so necessary to art is different from that of most modernist poetry. In the more common modernist practice the greatest aesthetic distance exists between the reader's total experience of the poem and the narrator, thus leaving the narrator fairly close to and identified with the situation of the poem.

For an example of these different "distances," the reader's total experience of Ransom's "Blue Girls" is much closer to the perceptions of the kindly, contemplative, apparently elderly narrator of the poem than is the reader's experience of "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" to the narrator Prufrock. Likewise, the narrator of "Blue Girls" has a detached (though sympathetic) attitude toward the material, i.e., the cavorting coeds; Prufrock, on the other hand, is neurotically involved in a situation that makes him the observed more than the observer. Also, irony is conditioned by the location of aesthetic distance. Prufrock becomes a subject of dramatic irony in the reader's experience

while the reader and the narrator share a common bond of perceiving the irony in the dramatic situation.

The Ransom narrator's detachment from the dramatic situation of the poem not only moves the narrator's experience closer to the reader's total experience of the poem, but, it may also be argued, the narrator and the poet himself speak with much the same voice. It would be foolish to deny that there are not affinities between writers and their personae--certainly the narrators who emerge from Ransom's poetry often strikingly resemble the intellectual, somewhat reserved, ironic, perhaps overly fastidious personage that seems to resemble Ransom the man.¹⁴ If this relative similarity between Ransom and his inferential narrators is "romantic," it is a different kind of handling than appears in The Prelude, one sharply qualified by the "negative capability" which exists between the narrator and his material.

In the last analysis Ransom's use of the narrator device can be said to be in the Yeats-Pound-Eliot-modernist tradition, though the place at which aesthetic distance is applied is different. His poetry (except in some of the early Poems About God) does not show the poet-persona-situation identification of a Shelley or a Wordsworth, but the relative closeness of the narrator as experiencing personality and the reader's total experience of the poem keeps Ransom's poetry from the impersonality prevalent in much modern poetry contemporary with his.

In his critical writing Ransom himself touches occasionally upon the subject of the narrator in poetry. Though it would be a mistake to equate the critic's theory with the poet's practice rigorously, an examination of such comments perhaps is illuminating, since most of Ransom's criticism postdates his poems.

In an American Review essay "Characters and Character" (1936, pp. 271-288) Ransom deals with what the role of the narrator should be in prose fiction. The discussion of the presence of the writer in his work ("author visibility" he calls it) anticipates points made in his later comments on the poetic narrator. One might well expect this of Ransom, who has elaborated, refined, and shifted his emphases throughout his many years as a critic, but who has not abandoned the fundamental premises of his earliest criticism.

Like most modern poets and critics, Ransom feels that "Anonymity, of some real if not literal sort, is a condition of poetry,"¹⁵ and that "the poet must suppress the man or the man would suppress the poet."¹⁶ His essay "A Poem Nearly Anonymous" in The World's Body criticizes the young Milton for making us "disturbingly conscious of the man behind the artist" who exhibits a "willful and illegal" rebellion against formal traditions.¹⁷ Yet Ransom openly admires the elegy, and part of his admiration stems from the tension between the irrepressible man and the self-effacing artist:

And probably we shall never find a better locus than "Lycidas" for exhibiting at once the poet and the man, the technique and personal interest, bound up tightly and contending all but equally; the strain of contraries, the not quite resolvable dualism, that is art.¹⁸

Though this quotation shows that he sees a role for the poet in that the expression of the artistic object, not personality, is the end of poetry:

Poetry is an expressive art, we say, and perhaps presently we are explaining that what it expresses is its poet; a dangerous locution, because the public value of the poem would seem to lie theoretically in the competence with which it expresses its object.¹⁹

Yet poetry of just aesthetic objects--"pure poetry"

Ransom calls it in The World's Body essay "Poets Without Laurels" which cites Wallace Steven's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" as an example-- ultimately does not interest him as much as what he calls "obscure poetry," i.e., poetry which has emotive or moral values implied. However, any poetry which has such values cannot be just aesthetic and object centered; the presence of some sort of human commentator, expressed or implied, follows, and the problem of a narrative presence inevitably arises. In The World's Body Ransom partially defines his critical position by reacting against writers who, like Wordsworth, write too autobiographically and thus sacrifice artistic form and soon exhaust their resources:

. . . they write some of their intenser experiences, their loves, pities, griefs, and religious ecstasies; but too literally, faithfully, piously, ingenuously. They seem to want to do it without wit and playfulness, dramatic sense, detachment, and it cuts them off from the practice of an art.²⁰

[If poets] insist too narrowly on their own identity and their own story, inspired by a simple but mistaken theory of art, they find their little poetic fountains drying up within them.²¹

The true artist, Ransom says, needs "aesthetic forms" to restrain him and "stand between the individual and his natural object and impose a check upon his action."²² Forms such as meter and rhyme act as a sort of buffer by which the predatory self can be restrained long enough so that the object can be contemplated as an object in itself and not as a thing for immediate subjective exploitation.²³ This knowledge of objectivity is largely what is meant by "body" in the title The World's Body (1938).

Three years later in The New Criticism Ransom defines his position again on the role of the poet in the poem, this time with respect to

the "traditionalist" viewpoint represented by Eliot. He criticizes Eliot's notion of

. . . the tradition as looking over the new circumstances [of time] and writing its own poem, while the poet depersonalizes himself and operates in the capacity of a private secretary to the tradition. This is to pay almost superstitious honors to tradition.²⁴

From his critical comments it appears that Ransom favors an intermediate position with regard to the narrator somewhere between the romantic poet-"I" identification and the depersonalization of the modernist tradition. That Ransom practiced what he advocated seems evident from a reading of his poetry.

Scholarship has made only a few brief references to Ransom's use of the narrator device, with Vivienne Koch's two or three pages devoted to the subject in the excellent "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" being by far the longest. She notes that in Ransom's poetry "the tone of narration is usually that of an ironic detachment from its occasion"; she then distinguishes three categories of narrator involvement in the dramatic situation:

- 1) There are times . . . when the narrator gets involved, in a very special way, by the intimacy of his connection with the subject of the narrative (see 'Miriam Tazewell,' 'Dead Boy' for the tone of affectionate address by which the narrator qualifies his relationship to the subjects, from whom he yet manages to keep a quite separate identity of values). This intimacy permits a very close rendering of his people . . . while, at the same time, he maintains a disinterested surveillance of their actions.
- 2) Sometimes, as in 'Parting at Dawn' and 'Spectral Lovers,' the poet, while involving himself in the lovers' dilemmas and stratagems, nevertheless takes an olympian and juridical view of their dispositions.
- 3) . . . in poems as dissimilar as 'Winter Remembered,' and in 'Philomela' . . . the dramatic necessities involve the poet at once as narrator, subject, and actor.²⁵

In another essay Vivienne Koch comments that, unlike the narrative voices of Marvell's or Donne's amorous poetry, the Ransom narrator "seems to be outside the experience of love, and judges it . . . like an omniscient spectator even in those poems where he permits himself first-person involvement."²⁶ Cleanth Brooks observes that Ransom's control of perspective "constitutes special claim to a kind of classical decorum,"²⁷ a decorum, one might add, that is largely effected through the narrator's viewpoint. Ransom, says Karl Knight, the author of the best book-length study of Ransom to date,

is typically the outside observer, one who sees the complexity of the human situation. He makes no simple identification of himself with one or the other of possible attitudes. Rather, he is like a man who listens to one side of an argument and agrees that there is some merit to it; then, hearing the other side, he sees some plausibility in that also.²⁸

John Stewart supports this position by observing that Ransom's poems "never come down foursquare on one side of an issue or offer a resolution to the situations they present."²⁹ This indecisiveness of the Ransom narrator is not necessarily evidence of intellectual ineffectuality; with equal validity one can argue that it shows intellectual integrity, for a recognition of ambiguity corresponds quite nicely with the psychological theory that the self is not one but rather many poses, many roles, and truth lies in the whole complex of such selves.³⁰ The truth of the total experience of "Dead Boy," for instance, lies not just in the narrator's subjective reaction to the "pig with a pasty face" but also in the narrator's perceptions and empathic appreciation of the viewpoints of the outsiders--the country kin, the mother, the neighbors, the preacher, and the reader's unification of all of these.

Though Ransom's poems are, as has already been observed, based on

a sort of narrative situation that a prose fictionist might work with, the poems are almost entirely "limited to retrospection. Their subjects do not move; their emotions are over."³¹ What appears then in the typical Ransom poem is not the subject in dramatic movement, but rather the plain of experience is the subject, caught at a moment of crisis as if in a frieze, and then filtered through the distinctively wry, ironic, sensitive, and sympathetic consciousness of the narrator.

The personality of the Ransom narrator comes through strongly. Bradbury speaks of Ransom's poetry being "richly endowed with personality."³² Though Miss Koch recognizes Ransom's generally traditionalist stand on personality in poetry, she writes:

Paradoxically, however, Ransom in his own poems has not been able to fully eradicate 'personality,' while doing everything poetically possible to inhibit it. That is to say, while he has successfully eliminated passion, he has nevertheless left the distinctive mark of an odd, intense, and dryly fine wit on everything he has touched.³³

Buffington observes that an attitude of "patient instruction"³⁴ characterizes the narrative personality. In "Janet Waking" it is reported to us that little Janet "would not be instructed in how deep/ Was the forgetful kingdom of death"; the narrator of "Blue Girls" advises the coeds "to practice your beauty," and the innocent girl of "Vaunting Oak" had been instructed of much mortality" by the "I" narrator-boy-friend. Other characteristics of an almost ironic pedantry are seen in the Ransom narrator's intellectual temperament, his allusions to classical and biblical literature, a focusing on very limited situations and probing them in depth from several perspectives, and a reluctance to make categorical statements and judgments. Also, the implied audience of Ransom's poetry (and there is just as surely an implied audience as there is an implied narrator) seems to be a sophisticated though

perhaps not wholly initiated group (one cannot help thinking of the ideal sort of audience the bright young university students of the Fugitive circle must have made) who are beyond the innocence and lack of awareness of most of Ransom's characters, but who are not yet the peers of the narrator.

Indeed, add to these qualities the often encountered professorial traits of wryness, irony, wit, and a retiring personality, and the temptation to slip from the personality of persona to the biography of Ransom the poet-scholar-teacher becomes great. Here a salutary corrective is offered by Knight who, though not speaking in a context of personae, observes that "the primitive state of knowledge concerning the relationship between the private mind of the artist and his work must be recognized."³⁵

The following chapters will examine Ransom's use of the narrator device from the early Poems About God (1919) through Chills and Fever (1924), Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927), Poems and Essays (1955), and Selected Poems (1945 and 1963 editions).

Chapter II, dealing with Poems About God, attempts to demonstrate that the narrators in Ransom's earliest work are not uniformly naive but rather represent a wide range of narrative voices. The following chapter, concerned with the poems in Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds which the poet has not anthologized in his three collected editions, examines the advances in narrative technique over the first volume and suggests that Ransom was moving from a romantic monistic viewpoint to an ironic dualism in both his philosophy and narrator technique. The fourth chapter works with the fine poems of Ransom's maturity, i.e., those poems (frequently revised) collected from Chills

and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds, along with the seven so-called "later" poems. Here the role of the narrator as objective commentator describing the dissociated sensibilities of characters caught in life's irreconcilable dualisms will be studied closely. And finally, a conclusion will summarize the principal ideas from the earlier chapters and propose an answer to the question of whether the inferential narrator in Ransom's poetry represents a single, developing personality or speaks with disparate voices. Also, the conclusion will attempt to say if the narrator device serves to unify all of Ransom's poetry.

FOOTNOTES

¹George T. Wright, The Poet in the Poem: The Personae of Eliot, Yeats, and Pound (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 22. Wright gives a brief bibliography of theoretical treatments of personae in note 10, pp. 165-166. Maynard Mack's discussion of Swift in The Augustans (New York, 1950) and his essay "The Muse of Satire," Yale Review, XLI (Autumn, 1951), pp. 80-92) show him to be one of the first to deal directly with the personae device. Richard Ellman's Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York, 1948) and The Identity of Yeats (New York, 1954), and Robert Langbaum's The Poetry of Experience (New York, 1957) are particularly useful for providing the literary context for narrator technique. In the movement from the nineteenth century's romantic mode of poet as narrator to the twentieth century's more symbolistic approach of making the narrator merge into a more archetypal or mythic voice, Yeats' theory of the mask seems to play a central role. The cultivation of a Yeatsian anti-self mask, which becomes the artist's vehicle for expression, conditions much twentieth century poetry, especially that which is in what may be called the dramatic monologue tradition practiced by Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Frost, Robinson, and Ransom. An important related concept which also has vitally affected personae practice is T. S. Eliot's idea of the impersonality of art and the depersonalization of the artist's personality in his art, discussed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which appears in Selected Essays of T. S. Eliot (New York, 1932).

²Rebecca Parkin, The Poetic Workmanship of Alexander Pope (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 7.

³Ibid.

⁴Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Spring, 1950), p. 234.

⁵Ibid., p. 238.

⁶John Bradbury, "Ransom As Poet," Accent, XI (Winter, 1951), p. 49.

⁷Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 8.

⁸F. O. Matthiessen, "Primarily Language," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), p. 395.

⁹Mark Schorer, "Technique As Discovery," The Hudson Review, I (Spring, 1948), pp. 67-87.

- ¹⁰Wright, p. 9.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 21.
- ¹²Parkin, p. 8.
- ¹³Wright, p. 58.
- ¹⁴For a brief account of Ransom at Kenyon College, see George Lanning, "Ransom as Editor," John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography, ed. Thomas Daniel Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), pp. 210-220.
- ¹⁵John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Scribner's, 1938), p. 2.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 3.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 12.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 4.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 278.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 3.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 2.
- ²²Ibid., p. 31.
- ²³Ibid., pp. 29ff.
- ²⁴John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), p. 147.
- ²⁵Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," in Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Roy Publishers, 1952), pp. 33-65.
- ²⁶Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," p. 260.
- ²⁷Cleanth Brooks, "The Doric Delicacy," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), p. 414.
- ²⁸Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), p. 17.
- ²⁹John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time (Princeton, 1965), p. 206.
- ³⁰Eliseo Vivas, "The Self and Its Masks," Southern Review, I (April, 1948), p. 317ff.
- ³¹Donald Stauffer, "Portrait of the Poet-Critic as Equilibrist," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 432-433.

³²Bradbury, p. 45.

³³Koch, "The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," p. 65.

³⁴Buffington, p. 68.

³⁵Knight, p. 39.

CHAPTER II

POEMS ABOUT GOD: THE SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

While an instructor at Vanderbilt University, John Crowe Ransom in 1916 began writing poetry at the relatively advanced age (for a beginning poet) of twenty-eight.¹ He published his first volume of verse, Poems About God, in 1918. That the book was not without some merit is evidenced by the aid Christopher Morley and Robert Frost gave in finding a publisher.² In addition, Robert Graves chose nine of the poems for his collection of Ransom's poetry published in England as Grace After Meat (1924). Nevertheless, Ransom has let the verse in Poems About God go out of print by not anthologizing a single poem from this volume in his three selected editions of 1945, 1955, and 1963.³ Speaking of his early days as a poet, Ransom in 1961 refers to his earliest book as "now extinct, I am happy to say."⁴ However, Poems About God does not deserve to fall into total obscurity, for, as Frederick Bornhauser points out in the abstract to his useful unpublished dissertation "Dis-owned Progeny: The Early Poems of John Crowe Ransom,"

Any critic attempting to arrive at a synoptic view of Ransom's work will include Poems About God not only because it is part of the canon, but because it contains, when all is said and done, early poetry which is homogenous with the later.⁵

Writing of Poems About God in a 1920 Yale Review, Charles Stork was not completely without hope for the young poet:

. . . though a monstrosously uninspired little book, [it] promises something when the author has learned a bit more

about life and a good deal more about poetic form.⁶

John Bradbury observes that the volume "contained much that is interesting and a great deal that is indicative of later developments."⁷

Bornhauser thoroughly documents the idea that there is not a major difference in "conception and approach" between Poems About God and the later work,⁸ and Robert Buffington also notes similarity in situations, settings, and themes.⁹ Commenting on thematic similarity in Ransom's first book and his second one, Vivienne Koch writes that

We find the themes of Poems About God present in Chills and Fever but translated to a different level of discourse, and purged of their former sentimentality by an objective and careful scrutiny of the intellect.¹⁰

Though critical opinion is agreed that the general level of quality between Poems About God and Ransom's later work is significant, the estimate of the extent of this difference varies widely. Buffington says that "What strikes the reader of Poems About God is the distance between it and Selected Poems, so wide that he may scarcely believe it the work of the same poet."¹¹ Bornhauser, on the other hand, while allowing a "major difference in quality,"¹² sees "no startling gap between Poems About God and Chills and Fever [published] five years later; Ransom's poetry was in a state of constant development."¹³ Moreover, he goes on to say, there are poems in Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds which are inferior to some of those in Poems About God,¹⁴ and some of the poems in this earliest volume would fit comfortably into another Selected Poems.¹⁵

While a first reading of Poems About God leaves a generally unfavorable impression, a careful re-examination shows that there is a wide range of craftsmanship, and though the bulk of the poems are of

indifferent quality, there are others which do not deserve being buried by the worst. Among these one might include "The Resurrection," "Roses," "Street Light," "The School," and "April" as having a genuine Ransom style.

Thematically, Merrill Moore finds the poems "very interesting because they are preoccupied with a debate or struggle with an identification with and against early Christian theology."¹⁶ Stewart, who confesses he finds the book "tedious except for what it tells us about Ransom's development," comments that "The few outbursts of anger against the injustice of God are smothered by other passages of conventional piety . . ."¹⁷ Like Buffington and Vivienne Koch, he perceives themes to which Ransom would return; specifically they are death and the fading of energy and beauty, lovers' quarrels, aestheticism versus sensuous pleasure, and a rebellion against the mundane.¹⁸

Unlike the for-and-against Christian theology theme which Moore and Stewart see, Buffington shows a fuller apprehension of Poems About God's thematic strategy by observing that the book is "not about one God but many Gods, as many Gods as there are human points of view; they are, taken together, a testimony to the ultimate Unknowableness of the One . . ."¹⁹ Bornhauser's opinion is related: "Ransom's purpose . . . is to reveal the multiplicity of circumstances in which it is possible for men to praise or blame a God who has lost a common definition."²⁰ Bradbury, one would suspect, attributes rather more profundity to the young poet's design than the artistry of Poems About God would seem to support when he writes that

Essentially God is regarded as a human creation, a construction of mythic order by means of which man can personalize, and thus realize, a sense of the 'ultimate mystery,' joyfully, indignantly, or however.²¹

With respect to aesthetic distance and artistic control, Buffington rather boldly asserts that

perhaps the most remarkable quality of Poems About God as a first book is its anonymity. As a treatment . . . of various points of view, it has little of the autobiographical quality we have come to expect in a modern writer's first volume.²²

This remark seems to be a plain misjudgement. One is much more inclined to agree with Vivienne Koch, who states that "Most of the Poems About God are 'I' poems, and transparently autobiographical."²³ Bornhauser, whose thesis commits him to a defense of Ransom's artistry from its beginnings, shows his awareness of charges of the narrator's naivete and tries to defend the poet by arguing that "it is important to observe Ransom's use of personae and to avoid the assumption it is the poet who is the militant critic of God."²⁴ What emerges from a close examination of the poems is that both are partially correct--there is an autobiographical "I" but there are also, in some of the better poems, fairly skillfully presented personae.

Bradbury offers the best general criticism of the use of the narrator in Poems About God:

The general failure of these poems . . . is one of tone, and, especially, of pose. To achieve his detachment, the poet too often dons homespun or overalls. . . . The pose of bucolic naiveté provides ample opportunity for irony, but not always for poetry. The poems are, as a rule, underkeyed. When God aids Mother with her pies in ['Noonday Grace'], the effect is closer to James Whitcomb Riley than to Rilke. . .²⁵

When the homespun appears . . . we know it for a costume worn with an air of mockery, but not without a certain pride at the fit. For a serious poet any pose, particularly a sustained one of naiveté, is perilous; and this early Ransom, like Robert Frost, too often falls victim to his manner.²⁶

Nevertheless, like Vivienne Koch, Bradbury here shows that he is so preoccupied with the obviously inferior autobiographical "pose," as he

calls it, that he is unable to perceive those poems where the narrator is handled in a more artistic fashion.

In his analysis of points of view in Poems About God, Bornhauser divides the poems into four classes. Since point of view in all of Ransom's poetry is so closely identified with the device of the narrator, a review of Bornhauser's classification is useful. His largest group,²⁷ which includes fifteen of the book's thirty-three poems, is "spoken by one who himself is involved in the situation, a dramatic persona, in one degree or another, whose voice regulates the tone and meaning of the poem."²⁸ The second group, comprising five poems, include "those spoken by a first-person narrator who is not a participant but an observer of the situation, and perhaps not even an observer but a mere teller of a tale."²⁹ Group three, also narrated in the first person, numbers nine poems narrated

by a subjective observer of phenomena in nature or the community of men which do not answer to the definition of dramatic situation but are the objects of ironic commentary, criticism, or interpretation.³⁰

The four remaining poems, spoken in the third person, are told "in what may be cautiously called the voice of the poet making what amount to objective observations."³¹

Bornhauser's arrangement is both plausible and useful; however, he uses the scheme primarily as a means of determining the order in which he discusses the poems, and there is no real attempt to determine the success of the various narrator strategies. Though realizing the inherent weaknesses of all such classifying of poetry, I wish to propose the following categories of narrator technique in Poems About God:

- 1) Narrator as Boy

- 2) Narrator as Angry Young Man
- 3) Narrator as Young Lover
- 4) Narrator as Young Man Instructed
- 5) Narrator as Objective Commentator
- 6) Narrator Clearly Unidentified with the Poet
- 7) No Explicit Narrator Presence

In Poems About God the young Ransom was, I should like to argue, searching for his proper poetic voice. Considering that there are only thirty-three poems in the collection, the relatively large number of discrete narrators in the above list (if the validity of the list is granted) would seem to reflect experimentation. Groups 1-5, all first person narrations, might be seen as both a chronological development from boyhood to manhood and also as a development from the poet naively identified with his materials to the poet's using the inferential narrator to achieve greater control over his material. Parallel with this greater control is the growth in the use of a subtle irony, that hallmark of Ransom's mature style.

In group six the poet tries narrators alien to what is presumably his own point of view, a tactic he all but abandons in his later work. The seventh and last group of poems include those in which no explicit narrator appears; this mode, too, he does not use frequently, though a number of the poems of his maturity, while not having an explicit first person reference, have a strongly implied narrative presence.

Admittedly the classification of the poems into these seven divisions is somewhat arbitrary; nor is there anything in the Introduction or the arrangement of the book which suggests these groups. Indeed, the very randomness of the ordering--the appearance of good poems next

to very weak ones, for example--suggests the indiscriminating endeavors of an amateur with latent talents struggling to find his most suitable style.

Poems in group one, the narrator as boy, include "Noonday Grace," "Grace," and "The School." Of "Noonday Grace" Bornhauser writes that to critics it has been the most offensive poem in the collection,³² and Buffington says that it is "the one poem in the group that seems entirely amateurish."³³ Bradbury's earlier quoted observation about the weakness of the bucolic pose seems fully justified in the following excerpts:

Mother, I'll thank you for the tumbler now
Of morning's milk from our Jersey cow.

and then the mawkish concluding couplet,

As long as I keep topside the sod,
I'll love you always, mother and God.

Yet even in this very naive poem praising country home cooking there is a strain of an ironic attitude toward religion that confuses the reader and makes him wonder if the narrator's age is nearer to nine or twenty-nine:

Thank you, good Lord, for dinner-time
Gladly I come with the sweat and grime
To play in your Christian pantomime.

"The School," which Bornhauser thinks "most distinctly points ahead to the achievement that was to come,"³⁴ is narrated by a sensitive boy (perhaps much like the poet when he was a youth) "Equipped with Grecian thoughts" who asks

how could I live
Among my father's folk? My father's house
Was narrow and his fields nauseous.

I kicked his clods for being common dirt,
 Worthy a world which never could be Greek;
 Cursed the paternity that planted me
 One green leaf in a wilderness of autumn. . .

There is here a resemblance to the later "Philomela," as both Vivienne Koch³⁵ and Bornhauser note, the latter writing that "In both poems there is some evidence of the self-consciousness and uncertainty besetting the American who contemplates the flowering of culture on the European continent."³⁶ The poet and his young narrator try to resolve this Jamesian sense of American inferiority by an absorption in a first love and the lure of money, but we sense that the boy, like Holden Caulfield, cannot really persuade himself that his proud dreams and ideals should be sacrificed.

In "Grace" there is the anger of a boy whose fundamentalistic idealism toward God has been shattered by the revolting death of a hired man.³⁷:

I thought of the prayers the fool had prayed
 To his God, and I was seeing red,
 When all of a sudden he gave a heave
 And then with shuddering--vomited!
 And God, who had just received full thanks
 For all his kindly daily bread,
 Now called it back again--perhaps
 To see that his birds of the air were fed,

 Even of deaths there is a choice,
 I've seen you give a good one, God,
 But he in his vomit laid him down,
 Denied the decency of blood.

The naturalistic detail is unlike the later Ransom, and the irony here is bitter and heavy--it is not, as Richmond Croom Beatty has noted, "the subtle irony of his later style."³⁸ The narrator angrily seeks to blame the pious man's death on something, so he directs his hostility against God. Yet a close rereading of the poem suggests that even in his moment of the most righteous moral indignation he is slightly

beguiled by the terrible ironies of the situation. This preoccupation with irony is a thread that the later Ransom narrator typically enlarges upon and uses to mellow and objectify emotional reactions which in this poem are too blatantly displayed.

The second group of poems continues in the same vein of anger as "Grace," only here the boy of "Grace" working on his father's farm has grown to young manhood. As in "Grace," there is the fury of idealistic innocence discovering evil and grappling to come to terms with it. Because the young narrator has a need, perhaps neurotic, to assign moral culpability, God becomes a scapegoat, for the narrator is unwilling to take the atheistic or existential way out and believe that man lives in an amoral universe. Interestingly, in 1930 Ransom was still trying to rationalize the problem of evil in a theistic context in his God Without Thunder. At any rate, the very title Poems About God is an ironic protest against evil instead of the devotional verse we might expect, for the dominant note of the book is the indifference and inefficiency of God in his ordering the universe. "Geometry," for instance, asserts

An easy thing to improve on God
Simply the knowing of even from odd,
Simply to count and then dispose
In patterns everybody knows,
Simply to follow curve and line
In geometrical design.

Bornhauser feels there is an ironic distance in this poem; the narrative voice, he argues,

is so utterly arrogant in its cocky assumption of the virtues inherent in the basic mathematical sciences that the careful reader becomes aware of a distance which has been manipulated by the poet, a distance which allows a sense of irony in man's self-deceptive and self-defeating efforts to lord it over nature.³⁹

Looking only at this one poem, one might be persuaded by this reasoning, but in the context of all the poems in the collection, and especially of the ones in this group, it would seem dubious that such a sophisticated manipulation of ironic distance is really present.

The narrator of "November" provides clear evidence of a very self-conscious adolescent protest untinged with irony. His anger with the narrowness of a self-righteous church community is shown by his rejecting the girl his mother wants him to marry and taking an older woman as mistress. Unlike the youths of the poems discussed earlier, the narrator of "November" has a troubled and complex dimension to his personality. Bornhauser refers to this poem as "Hardyesque" with the speaker not triumphant and cynical, but defeated and sad.⁴⁰ The narrator seems to be the same sort as the man of the later "Man Without Sense of Direction," though in the latter poem the narrator, who reports the disturbed protagonist, has the detachment of Ransom's mature style. "November," on the other hand, reflects the Sturm und Drang of a young man unable to evaluate his experience objectively.

"Sickness," "April," "Prayer," and "The Power of God" all return to the bitterness against the Deity of "Geometry." Though God is depicted as a helpless but comforting bedside vigil-keeper, the heavy irony of the narrator is transparent in the poem's conclusion:

But God is pitying to the end,
And gives an office to my knees.

"April" has a haughty God indifferent to man's suffering who lets spring return only because

I have lacked that pretty lift of praise
That mounted once from these emaciated minstrels.

In a hint of Ransom's later irony and punning, the narrator observes that when spring does return, "I swear/ He shall receive his praise."

"Prayer" recounts the slight, embarrassed discomfort in heaven at an old woman's "low obeisance and abasement" while pleading for her son. The only reference to the narrator is an incidental "I fear," but in "The Power of God" the narrator's voice is central as he tells how he would order the cosmos were he the Deity:

Then arrange ye again how the people's task may be done,
There shall no woman toil till they see my sign of the
sun.

"Morning" and "Moonlight" conclude this section on a softer tone. The former is a protest against God for making men "Who might be angels but are fastened down with bodies"; "Moonlight" reproves the Deity's token gift of moonbeams which "made his wicked world seem right" and which "unman us." Generally the poems in this group strike the reader as adolescent in their rebelliousness. All have a certain bold assertive vigor, but the voice of passion too often loses its control of the material.

Of the poems of the young lover group "Sunset," Ransom's only published free verse,⁴¹ and apparently one of his earliest efforts,⁴² is prosy and fatuous until the last five lines, which catch something of the narrator's tone in the later "Lady Lost." Also embarrassingly foolish are the narrators of "The Lover" and "Overtures," who, along with the narrator of "November" discussed in the second group, give support to Vivienne Koch's contention that Poems About God betrays "a surprisingly adolescent sense of sin in relation to sex."⁴³

"Roses," however, sounds a strain of Ransom's mature voice. The dramatic situation in this poem presents a dutiful young man who, upon

retiring to his room to study, finds that his inamorata has left a rose. His delight collapses, though, when he discovers that the rose is "A horrid thing of bric-a-brac," and he meditates

Red roses keep a thorn,
And save their loveliness a while
And in their perfect date unfold.
But you, beyond all women born,
Have spent so easily your smile
That I am not the less forlorn
Nor these ironic walls less cold,
Because it smiles, the chilly rose,
As you are smiling, I suppose.

Like the other three poems in the young lover group, "Roses" is a first-person narration by one who is directly involved; yet here is no autobiographical adolescent outcry. There is control and something of the distinctively detached and ironic tone which marks some of Ransom's later fine poems about love such as "Piazza Piece," "Winter Remembered," and "Two in August."

Group four poems, the young man instructed, show a further development away from the narrator's direct involvement in the center of an emotional experience. These poems have a milder, quieter tone, though, as in "Worship," there is still the iconoclastic thrust, this time toward the fundamentalist's attitude toward drinking. The narrator is not himself the drinker but rather is the sympathetic reporter of a man who teaches him that "God is sweetest of all/ Discovered in the drinking hall."

"The Ingrate" is about a Russian immigrant who makes the young narrator realize that the beauties of one's homeland always seem more lovely than any place else. The poem makes its point with artful discretion, for the narrator does not moralize or interpret the old man's speech in the final stanza. A more explicit narrator is that of "The

Bachelor," who is heartened on a weary journey by seeing an industrious housewife working in her yard. This poem, incidentally, has more than a casual resemblance to Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." "The Cloak Model," narrated by an older preceptor whose lesson is "The fact that in the finest flesh/ There isn't any soul," prefigures Ransom's later themes of romantic disillusionment. The relationship between the young narrator and the older man is much the same as in the later "Puncture" between the young narrator-soldier and the veteran Grimes.

What distinguishes the poems of this group from those of the three previous groups is that the center of attention is not the narrator himself--the "I" of the romantic tradition--but other dramatic characters.

In the fifth group of poems the focus continues to remain on other characters, but the narrator changes from callow learner to objective observer, generally more mature and even less implicated in the dramatic situation than in the previous group. Some of the book's best poetry is in this section. Though the narrator here is certainly more detached than in the angry "I" poems of the first two groups, his presence in this class ranges from a fairly heavy involvement in "Friendship" to a minimal one in "The Christian," where he makes no judgment but simply reports a story. The narrator of "Friendship" seems too obtrusive and too dogmatic in his repugnance toward his chiding puritanical friend, and the poem centers too much on the reactions of the narrator and not enough on the main characters. Equally unsatisfactory is the barest sort of narrator presence (a single "I") in "The Christian"; one wonders what purpose is served in this poem by the narrator device

at all. But the six poems between these extremes--"Darkness," "Christmas Colloquy," "Wrestling," "The Swimmer," "Street Light," and "The Resurrection"--show the sort of narrative voice Ransom eventually depended upon in later poetry, i.e., an objective observer who nevertheless can enter a dramatic situation empathically and interpret it with a fine witty grace and gentle irony but without making his presence an intrusion into the poem.

"Darkness" and especially "Street Light" have a delicate quality reminiscent of the Emily Dickinson narrator who colors a commonplace situation so as to make us see it with fresh insight. "Wrestling," which depicts two country champions competing after a day of threshing, is narrated, writes Buffington, not in

the words of an aficionado absorbed in the strength and grace of the athletes. . . but the words of a somewhat detached spectator who cannot entirely shake a sense of human puniness, even here, and who might be imagined as recalling, as he watches them pound 'much good sod to dust,' what the Bible says will come of human flesh.⁴⁴

This poem exhibits two of the characteristics of the successful later narrators: an ability to see local detail in a cosmic, philosophic context and also to perceive the irony of a situation, in this poem the frailty of even the wrestlers without the narrator himself being a victim of dramatic irony.

"The Swimmer" deals with the conflict between body and soul, but much more artfully than "Morning" of the second group. Though the narrator here seems unable to resolve the dilemma, as was done later in "Painted Head," the poem is successful, Stewart feeling it is one of the three or four best poems in the volume.⁴⁵ "Christmas Colloquy," writes Bornhauser, displays major elements of Ransom's later poetry including

"a witty, ironic treatment of a dramatic situation involving adults and children and an animal by a persona aware of an ironic dualism."⁴⁶

But it is "The Resurrection," which has both a situation and a narrator similar to Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar," that represents perhaps the best of narrator technique in Poems About God. The poem does not have the distinctive diction nor the subtlety of later poems, but it shows the narrator firmly controlling the situation and objectively interpreting it:

Long, long before men die I sometimes read
 Their stoic backs as plain as graveyard stones,
 An epitaph of poor dead men indeed,
 I never pass those old and crooked bones,
 Ridden far down with burden and with age,
 Stopping the headlong highway till they lean
 Aside in honor of my equipage,
 But I am sick and shamed that Heaven has been
 So clumsy with the inelastic clay!
 'What pretty piece of hope then have you spun,
 My old defeated traveler,' I say,
 'That keeps you marching on? For I have none.
 I have looked often and I have not found
 Old men bowed low who ever rose up sound.'

The sixth category I should like to suggest is composed of poems whose narrators clearly do not represent the general similarity of viewpoint in poet and narrator manifested in the first five groups. "One Who Rejected Christ" and "The Four Roses" have the book's only unsympathetic narrators, whose accounts of themselves make them the object of the poems' ridicule. "Under the Locusts" seems to be narrated by old men who comment on local incidents which support the theme of mutability. That Ransom used this type of narrator in only three poems, none of which is particularly distinguished, indicates that this narrative mode, used so successfully by Browning, was not his *métier*.

The seventh and last group, also containing only three examples--

is made up of those poems which have no expressed narrator, though there does often seem to be an implicit narrator similar to the ones found in the earlier groups. Indeed, in the previous six groups only an incidental "I" kept several of the poems from being classified here. "Dumb-Bells," for instance, seems to be reported by the same sort of philosophic objective observer as "Wrestling," but no allusion to a narrator appears. Nor is there an explicit narrator in "Men," a third person account of The Tempest's Miranda reacting joyfully to the landing of "The very casual adventurers/ Who took a flood as quickly as a calm,/ And kept their blue eyes blue to any weather."

"By the Riverside" is a third person account of a "sinner" who is suddenly caught up in a beautiful scene in nature:

The sinner's mocking tongue is dry,
Wonder is on that mighty jeerer,
He loves, and he never loved before,
He wants the glowing sky no nearer.

One could argue that the sinner here is the angry young man of the second group of poems who is now chastened by an unanticipated insight. There is apparently no irony directed at the sinner himself; rather, as Bornhauser observes, "The irony of the poem inheres in the notion that all is in the eye of the beholder, who may be suddenly caught up in a pantheistic vision."⁴⁷ It is as if the poet himself has perceived a certain folly in the emotional identification of the "I" narrator with his material and wishes to detach the narrative voice from so direct involvement in the situation. Although Ransom does return to a first person narrator as his wonted voice, "By the Riverside" may be viewed as a sort of repentant valediction to the naivete' of the angry "I" of the first two sections.

Buffington writes that Ransom's "direct treatment" of his material in Poems About God shows that his "characteristic control was hard won and is not the constitutional fastidiousness that it has been mistaken for."⁴⁸ As the preceding discussion has tried to indicate, the use of the narrator device in Poems About God suggests that the naive direct handling of the material in the earlier groups gives way to a more sophisticated technique in the objective commentator of group six. What Randall Jarrell says in general about Poems About God is born out by the development of the book's inferential narrators:

Some of these earlier poems are nothing but the revulsion and condemnation that are the direct response of innocence and goodness to the evil of the world: at first one is separated from the other absolutely, but afterwards, occasionally, they begin to be joined in the sweet-sour, good-and evil, steady struggle that is usual in Ransom's mature poems.⁴⁹

The narrator's attitude toward God follows a parallel development, too, changing from the adolescent anger of innocence affronted to the mellower tones of the poems narrated by the objective commentator whose irony, though not as subtle as in the later poems, is gentler and predicated more on an acceptance of the way things are than is the bitter irony of the angry young man.

One might say that in Poems About God Ransom was searching for his authentic voice, that he experimented (though probably not very consciously) with a whole spectrum of narrative voices ranging from the close relationship of the poet and narrator to the opposite extreme of near complete depersonalization in which no narrator appears. As might be expected from Ransom's comments pertinent to the inferential narrator quoted in Chapter I, his final choice of a narrative voice is an intermediate one which is best represented in Poems About God by the

fifth group (page 28) described above. It is from the narrator as objective commentator--the detached but sympathetic, wryly ironic mature man who seems to have a great deal in common with the poet himself--that Ransom's search for his authentic voice ends.

FOOTNOTES

¹Donald Davidson, Southern Writers in the Modern World (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), p. 14.

²Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 19.

³The basic text used for discussion of the selected poems is Selected Poems (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), which is a revised and enlarged edition, though Ransom has revisions in the 1945 Selected Poems and revisions and additions in the 1955 Poems and Essays.

⁴Cleanth Brooks et al., Conversations in the Craft of Poetry (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 86.

⁵Frederick W. Bornhauser, "Disowned Progeny: The Early Poems of John Crowe Ransom" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1966) Dissertation Abstracts, Vol. 28A, Pt. 1, 665-A.

⁶Charles Stork, [untitled review of Poems About God.] Yale Review, IX (April, 1920), p. 664.

⁷John Bradbury, The Fugitives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 16.

⁸Frederick Bornhauser, "Disowned Progeny: The Early Poems of John Crowe Ransom" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1966), p. 116. It is perhaps wise to point out here that Bornhauser is alone or almost alone in his rather high appraisal of the artistry of Poems About God. Though he has covered a lot of ground no one else has, the burden of critical opinion is against him. The value of his dissertation lies in his careful study and comments about the poems, even if his aesthetic judgments may not always be reliable.

⁹Buffington, p. 38.

¹⁰Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Spring, 1950), p. 232.

¹¹Buffington, p. 38.

¹²Bornhauser, p. 116.

¹³Ibid., p. 237.

- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 42.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 43.
- ¹⁶Brooks, et al., Conversations in the Craft of Poetry, p. 144.
- ¹⁷Stewart, p. 215.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Buffington, p. 5.
- ²⁰Bornhauser, p. 38.
- ²¹John Bradbury, "Ransom as Poet," Accent, XI (Winter, 1951), p. 47.
- ²²Buffington, p. 24.
- ²³Koch, p. 228.
- ²⁴Bornhauser, p. 37.
- ²⁵Bradbury, Accent, p. 47.
- ²⁶Bradbury, The Fugitives, p. 18.
- ²⁷The specific poems in each of Bornhauser's groups are as follows:
Group I--"Noonday Grace," "The Ingrate," "Sunset," "One Who Rejected Christ," "Grace," "The Lover," "Overtures," "Worship," "The Cloak Model," "The Bachelor," "Roses," "November," "Friendship," "The Four Roses," "The School"; Group II--"Wrestling," "Prayer," "Sickness," "Christmas Colloquy," "The Christian"; Group III--"Street Light," "Darkness," "Geometry," "Moonlight," "Morning," "The Power of God," "The Resurrection," "The Swimmer," "April"; Group IV--"Dumb Bells," "By the River-side," "Under the Locust," "Men."
- ²⁸Bornhauser, p. 49.
- ²⁹Ibid.
- ³⁰Ibid.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 50.
- ³²Ibid.
- ³³Buffington, p. 30.
- ³⁴Bornhauser, p. 68.
- ³⁵Koch, p. 229.
- ³⁶Bornhauser, p. 69.

³⁷The similarity to Frost's "Death of the Hired Man" is obvious. Ransom must have been particularly aware of Frost, who at the time Ransom wrote Poems About God was already enjoying great vogue.

³⁸Richmond Croom Beatty, "John Crowe Ransom as Poet," Sewanee Review, LII (Summer, 1944), p. 348.

³⁹Bornhauser, p. 90.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 73.

⁴¹Buffington, p. 19.

⁴²Stewart, p. 17.

⁴³Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Roy Publishers, 1952), p. 35.

⁴⁴Buffington, p. 32.

⁴⁵Stewart, p. 207.

⁴⁶Bornhauser, p. 86.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁸Buffington, p. 16.

⁴⁹Randall Jarrell, "John Ransom's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), p. 386.

CHAPTER III

THE "UNSELECTED" POEMS

Following the 1919 Poems About God Ransom's next book of verse, Chills and Fever, appeared in 1924. Three years later followed Two Gentlemen in Bonds. The poems in these two volumes, many of which first appeared in The Fugitive magazine, contain the great bulk of Ransom's published poetry.¹

It is unfortunate that after the heady Fugitive era the Ransom muse largely dried up. Commenting about this phenomenon Ransom in 1961 said,

I have nothing to say to people who say, 'Why don't you write more poetry?' Well, I say, my talent was a modest one, and I did the best I could; and I frequently threaten to do a little more, but I don't like to be held to any concept or magnitude or dimension. And every poet is a law to himself in these matters.²

At any rate, one must admit that although there are very fine poems in Two Gentlemen in Bonds, this volume shows a falling off in poetic facility. John L. Stewart wrote that Two Gentlemen in Bonds was "markedly inferior to Chills and Fever,"³ and Allen Tate also felt the later book was of lesser quality and that another volume might be redundant.⁴ The conclusion of this chapter will attempt to show how the narrator technique played its part in this decline.

This chapter deals with Ransom's use of the inferential narrator in the "unselected" poems, i.e., those poems in Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds which the poet did not pick for inclusion in his

three selected editions, Selected Poems (1945), Poems and Essays (1955), and the 1963 Selected Poems. There is nearly universal agreement about Ransom's acumen in choosing his best poems for these three collections. Stewart writes that "Except for one or two omissions he chose unerringly. These are his best poems. . ."⁵ While one might have wished also for two or three selections from Poems About God, it remains true that the "unselected poems" in Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds represent a sort of intermediate quality of poetry between Poems About God and the collections. Ironically, there is less critical comment about the "unselected poems" than that about the poems of Ransom's first volume.

In the unselected poems there is, as in Poems About God, a spectrum of narrative voices ranging from a naive "I" to a depersonalized straight narration. That Ransom has selected for his later anthologies all but three of his poems written in what has been called in the previous chapter the voice of the objective commentator supports the notion that the wry, ironic, detached though sympathetic observer is his most authentic narrative mode. The poems that remain as the unselected poems--while bearing much of the mature Ransom diction and colloquial tone, and showing a great advance in awareness and handling of metrical effects--still give the impression of the poet's struggling for his most effective mode of expression. However, the search for an appropriate technique almost necessarily parallels a search for a kind of personal philosophic viewpoint which can find expression in a technique. This seems particularly true for Ransom, who has a decidedly philosophic cast of mind. The evolution of Ransom's mature style--which can be said to be so much identified with his narrative point of view--is largely

the history of the development of his own kind of dualistic philosophy.

Ransom's dualism, which so thoroughly permeates his poetry and critical writing, could perhaps be traced back to the Judeo-Christian conflict between body and soul⁶ which he must have heard much of as the son of a rural Tennessee Methodist minister. Bradbury speculates that Ransom's "humanistic training imposed on a traditional Methodist substratum had developed a habitually dualistic mode of thought."⁷ In either case, it is no accident that the book titles and many of the poems of Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds reflect acute dualistic oppositions. The gentlemen in bonds, Abbott and Paul of the sonnet sequence, reflect the paralysis when mind and body are dissociated; the victim of the Chills and Fever poem "Here Lies a Lady" succumbs to alternate attacks of chills and fever, a dualism which well may be seen as a metaphoric definition of life itself. While Stewart's following comment is perhaps more germane to the selected poems in which the dualistic oppositions are usually more sharply defined, it also reveals Ransom's basically dualistic mode:

. . . such exquisite balancing [as in 'The Equilibrists'] of powerful opposing forces in the organization of his poems was a particular characteristic of Ransom's style. He liked to work on a narrow line where one false move would plunge him into the ludicrous and sentimental or worse still into archness. He did not often slip.⁸

In The World's Body Ransom shows his awareness of the dualistic conflict between the wish to impose a monism on the senses' pluralistic experience:

It seems that we know little but dualisms, pluralisms, successions. . . . Philosophically we are always crying out for the perfect integers of a monistic experience, the all-at-once, but though we can conceive them we have them very rarely if ever.⁹

Not only in life but in art too Ransom sees the necessity of dualism. Writing to Tate in 1926 when still in his period of great poetic productivity, Ransom asserts that

Art is our refusal to yield to the blandishments of 'constructive' philosophy and permit the poignant and actual Dichotomy to be dissipated in a Trichotomy; our rejection of third terms; our denial of Hegel's right to solve a pair of contradictions with a Triad. And here's a slogan: Give us dualism or we'll give you no Art.¹⁰

But it is in an essay published in the June, 1925, issue of The Fugitive that we get the most incisive comment about Ransom's theory of the development of the dualistic mind. Not only can the essay be seen as revealing Ransom's own intellectual growth, but, I believe, it indirectly sheds considerable light on Ransom's narrative technique.

In this two-page essay, entitled "Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent,"¹¹ Ransom distinguishes three stages of intellectual maturity. The first is a simple, matter-of-fact, "naive, unqualified, strictly business sort of dualism" in which the dualist "sees himself as one, and the objective world as another." Most men, Ransom implies, remain permanently at this level. The second or romantic stage, in which philosophy and metaphysics begin, is initiated when the individual realizes that he cannot really control his world:

Then he consents to surrendering the idea of his own dominating personality in exchange for the more tenable idea that he is in some manner related by ties of creation to the world, and entitled to some share in the general patrimony. The second step in his intellectual career is to discover somehow this community. It is a mystical community, capable of a great variety of definitions. So he finds God appointing to Nature and to himself appropriate places in a system where not a sparrow falls without effect and the hairs of his own head are numbered. So he is quick to note every sign of understanding on Nature's part, and his songs are filled with 'pathetic fallacies.' He is persistently trying to escape from an isolation which he cannot endure.

These efforts may or may not bring contentment. . . . The romantic poet comes to the point of puncturing his own illusions. . . . He has advanced at this point to a third position. . . . Certainly it is not a return to his first position, though it is an affirmation of dualism. . . . he is a dualist with a difference--reluctant, speculative, sophisticated rather than ingenuous, and richer by all the pathetic fallacies he has ever entertained. . . . It may be that most poetry is composed wholly from the point of view of the second, the purely romantic position. . . . But the earlier and greater poets (Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton) along with or following their share of romantic adventures, turned back to the stubborn fact of dualism with a mellow wisdom which we may call irony.

Irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of great minds--it presupposes the others. It implies first of all an honorable and strenuous period of romantic creation; it implies then a rejection of romantic forms and formulas; but this rejection is so unwilling, and in its statements there lingers so much of the music and color and romantic mystery which is perhaps the absolute poetry, and this statement is attended by such a disarming rueful comic sense of the poet's own betrayal, that the fruit of it is wisdom and not bitterness, poetry and not prose, health and not suicide. Irony is the rarest of the states of mind, because it is the most inclusive. . . .

Obviously little poetry of intrinsic worth can be written from the first, practical-minded sort of dualism. It would also seem apparent that Poems About God is largely written in the second or romantic stage: the angry tone of protest at the Deity is really the confession of the puniness of the proud mortal spirit. The poems "By the Riverside" and "The Swimmer" from this volume signal a desire to be identified with and absorbed into a pantheistic vision (the water imagery in both poems is thus particularly appropriate). Yet even in this earliest Ransom verse, which is so dominated by the romantic poet-persona identification, there is a clear sign of the dualistic-ironic mode in "The Resurrection" and especially in "Roses."

Of the unselected poems only one has a really naive "I" narrator; the bulk of these poems, I should like to argue, represent a narrative

presence which is moving from the latter stages of a romantic viewpoint to the dualistic mode of the third stage outlined in the essay above. There is a dualism in most of these poems, but it is often the reluctant dualism that still looks wistfully back to romantic monism ("Blackberry Winter" is an excellent example). The full-blown Ransom irony does not appear in these poems because, it would seem, a romantic view and an ironic view are mutually exclusive.

The selected poems of Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds discussed in the next chapter represent the delicate balancing of dualistic oppositions on what may be called the finely balanced fulcrum of an ironic perception. The tensions in these poems approach nearly perfect poising and counterpoising. While it is true that most of the unselected poems, as noted before, are at a stage of a pre-ironic point of view, there are several of the unselected poems which seem to be on the other side of the delicate balance; "Nocturne" (CF) and the "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" sequence provide evidence of dualisms so dissociated by a breakdown of a romantic impulse to unify experience that even the restorative ironic bridge collapses, exposing the wreckage of the hollow men of "Nocturne," and Abbott and Paul of the sonnets.

The thirty-four unselected poems (counting the "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" sonnet sequence as one poem) are divided for purposes of analysis into seven groups which represent, somewhat as in the previous chapter, a rough progression from the sort of angry "I" narrator involvement characteristic of Poems About God to an increasingly objective narrator who in the last two groups disappears altogether as the poet employs non-narrator techniques. The first group, including only one poem, is in the same mode as the angry young narrator seen in the previous

chapter. Following that are protest poems which criticize the order of the moral and social establishment. The third grouping deals with poems about love, and the fourth with what Vivienne Koch has so aptly phrased "the mythic past and the devalued present."¹² Next come several quasi-autobiographical poems in which themes from the four preceding groups are analyzed by the narrator as they impinge upon his own sensibility. The sixth group shows the narrator as objective commentator, Ransom's most wanted mode in his best poetry. Group seven employs the dramatic monologue and dialogue, while the final class contains poems written in what can be called simple or straight narrative.

The only poem in Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds whose narrator is at all analogous to the angry and passionate young man of the romantic "I" in Poems About God is the technically uninteresting "Number Five" (CF), in which the narrator hints of some dark Manfredian crime. That the strong appeal of the romantic sensibility persisted in Ransom during his most fecund period is born out in a definition of good and bad poetry that Ransom wrote in the September, 1925 issue of The Fugitive:

Good poetry is that which fits our own passionate history, and expresses that which needs expression from our private deeps. What is bad poetry? It is the poetry we do not like because it does not illuminate our private darkness, and which therefore we call unintelligible, or vain and trifling.¹³

This highly subjective attitude is surprising until one recalls that Ransom saw his third stage of development, ironic-dualism, subsuming both of the earlier phases.

Though Ransom's later critical books and essays take the whole romantic tradition severely to task,¹⁴ there is in all Ransom's poetry,

though especially in Poems About God and the unselected poems, the presence of a fundamental romantic tendency, "the urgency . . . of a subject to express his own feelings, not that of an object so individual as to demand expression."¹⁵

This urgency for expression of personal feelings is nowhere more evident in the unselected poems than in the group which I shall call protest poems, poems which have an affinity with the "angry-young-man group" in Poems About God but which expand the area of protest to include not only the Deity but also the order of the moral and social establishment.

"Adventure This Side of Pluralism" (CF) has narrator characteristics of two of the Poems About God groups. There is the angry young "I" narrator and there is the older preceptor, a Doctor of Genealogy who becomes the mouthpiece for what is obviously Ransom's own anti-monistic thinking. In the opening of the poem the young man protests against the religious establishment's imposing a monistic deity on the rich plurality and diversity of life. But unlike the counterpart narrator of Poems About God the young narrator here shows a self-conscious restraint clearly manifested in his diction:

Angered with a braggart kind
Prescribing others to its yoke
And seeming jauntily designed,
I rent my smooth locks and I spoke. . . .

In what is one of Ransom's few attempts at myth-making the old doctor says that this lonely Deity created all the forms of life but endowed them with too much of his own essence and thus hopelessly dispersed his unified throne. The doctor, like the angry young man of Poems About God, who has rejected what he thinks is a bumbling and

inefficient god), implies that he has repented of his youthful worshipping when he "bended a good knee/ As a novice in those days/ To my mad Aunt Piety." The poem shows a romantic pantheistic strain in Ransom and foreshadows the structure-texture dualism which he fully elaborated in The New Criticism (1942). Feeling that our own age of domination by science and technology has upset the healthy structure-texture, God-nature, mind-body, science-poetry dualism, Ransom has never tired in his later critical writing of pleading for the second term in each of these dualisms. That he used as narrator the voice of the learned old doctor (a Tiresias figure) to present his arguments indicates that he sensed, and correctly so, that such a maturer personage would increase the credibility of his ideas and provide the kind of objective, dispassionate viewpoint which characterizes the selected poems.

The remaining five poems in the protest group have no explicit narrators, yet, as in the seventh group discussed in the previous chapter, there often seems to be a strongly implied presence even though no first person references appear. For instance, in "Grandgousier" (CF) the clergymen who prevent a dying alcoholic from having a drink are indicted by an angry implied narrator; the doggerel meter here helps establish the tone of indictment and ridicules their pharisaical attitude:

Bishop Bamboozle;
Bishop Bamboozle,
You voided his guzzle.
You shall have crowns
And angel gowns.

"Fresco: From the Last Judgment," (TGB), which Stewart considers "lumpish and incoherent,"¹⁶ returns to the theme of protest against the Deity's managing of things. In the first scene, reminiscent of both

"Prayer" in Poems About God and the humorous setting of Marc Connelly's play The Green Pastures, the Lord commands Gabriel, who solemnly "Un-wrapped his trump, and beginning pale as the tomb/ By littles he pur-pled his cheek on Crack-o'-Doom." But another scene returns to the old bitterness as a mother

. . . laughed at the shapes of Doom
 Brandished at Heaven's host her crazy broom:
 'Ye have tarried I think by the way. The war is done.
 Your summons had been timelier seven years gone.'

The concluding scene of the poem, however, shows a shift in the object of satire from the Deity to the vanity of beautiful women, epitomized by Cleopatra. In both "Fresco" and "Adventure This Side of Pluralism," which concludes with an admonition to mankind against fratricidal warfare, it is apparent that men and not just the Divine Power (as in Poems About God) are due critical comment. This indicates a movement toward Ransom's best manner in which the focus is on the irony of the human situation, with theological values fairly submerged.

In "Little Boy Blue" (TGB) another horn is blown, but unlike Gabriel, Little Boy Blue (blue is Ransom's symbolic color for fullness, life, hope, bravery¹⁷ much as with Wallace Stevens) sounds forth a vital melody that animates the lethargic animals who "ran and tossed their hooves and horns of blue/ And jumped the fence and gambolled kangaroo." All but one of the poem's eight stanzas are straight narration with no explicit narrator present. However, in the sixth stanza an unsympathetic moralist (reminiscent of group six in Poems About God) raises a discordant voice against the renaissance spirit of Boy Blue:

A plague on such a shepherd of the sheep
 That careless boy with pretty cows to keep!
 With such a burden I should never sleep.

This poem--more sharply than most of Ransom's others in Poems About God and the unselected poems--points up the poet's failure to reconcile or see in an ironic perspective the opposing forces of a dualism (in this poem an expression of a spontaneous joy and a moralistic rebuke against irresponsibility).

"The Vagrant" (CF) and "Boris of Britain" (CF), the concluding poems of the protest group, also have no explicit "I" narrator, but both sound as if an implied narrator is defending a socially suspect individual before a townspeople's tribunal; this seems especially so because in both poems there are questions which appear to come from the narrator's auditors. In "The Vagrant" a Bohemian-artist type who "leers in the parson's face" is pled for by a narrative voice who makes it clear that the man is not a threat to the local daughters but rather

. . . visits with others,
With the Queen Guinevere,
Troy's women, Eden's,
Towns not near.

The narrator of "Boris of Britain" (CF), a poem which has the vaguely medieval setting that Ransom is fond of eliciting in such poems as "Necrological" (CF, SP) and "Spiel of the Three Mountebanks" (CF, SP), tells with approbation of the solicitor Boris' violent verbal and physical explosion in court against the corrupt legal establishment. This poem, like the others of this group, lacks detachment and control. Despite the lack of a narrative presence, one senses that the poem is too directly a sublimation of the poet's own emotion; the angry man outruns the artist and the violence is too bare. Hooded under the veil of his ironic mode, a surprising amount of violence is present in Ransom's selected poems, but "Boris of Britain" exposes its emotion too

baldly.

The next group of poems--those dealing with love--lack the silliness of the narrator of the comparable group in Poems About God. But, like the poems in that volume, they show a lack of a passionate fulfillment which often grows into a bitterness that sees unfulfilled love and death in the same terms. The "I" narrator of "Miller's Daughter" (TGB), for example, cannot communicate his inhibited love for a simple country girl despite his great learning; he is a poetic equivalent of a Winesburg, Ohio grotesque. Contrasting with the timid narrator of "Miller's Daughter" is the lordly Caesar figure of "Triumph" (CF) who finds that the woman "who took my oath" is an uncaught captive:

It was her empty house that fell before my legions;
Of where her soul inhabits I have conquered naught;
It is so far from these my Roman regions!

"Yea" (CF) and "Nay" (CF) are two companion sonnets thematically very similar to "Triumph." In all three the "I" is directly involved in the situation, a tactic which Ransom mostly abandons in the selected love poetry. The crescendo of the lovers' concord in "Yea" collapses in "Nay" when, with his arms about the woman, the narrator says

But no, the tight imprisonment was vain,
Too physical and wide to catch a heart;
When we had come most near, and scarce were twain,
Some soul was still unmet, and much apart.

And the closing couplet brings in the mortal note so often mixed with Ransom's poetry about love:

And as for death, whose stroke dissevers men,
What fool would hope for firm possession then?

"To A Lady Celebrating Her Birthday" (CF) is a fine poem, one that would have comfortably fit into the selected poems. One would suspect that Ransom rejected it as an overreaction to the heavy "I" involvement

in the other love poems. In this poem the narrator is quite similar to the narrators of Donne's amorous poetry, especially of "The Anniversary," though, as Stewart observes, "Ransom did not read Donne with much attention until his style was formed and does not consider Donne to have had any influence on his poetry."¹⁸ Although the "I" narrator is the lover, he is objectively detached, and the theme of the relationship of love and death is never so clearly stated:

What can a virtuous pale lover do
Who's prey to dissolution quick as you?
This day smells mortuary more than most. . .

Know this, though desperate our cases:
Thus will I hold you out of other harms
Till these be palsied paralytic arms;
Then be we grizzled polls and yellow faces
In these respective places.

There is here a distinctly metaphysical flavor, especially in the diction; in conception and style the poem has much in common with one of Ransom's undisputed little masterpieces, "The Equilibrists," (TGB, SP), though in the latter poem the narrator is not the lover but a highly interested third party.

The remainder of the love poems group have no explicit "I" narrator but, as was observed earlier in reference to the protest group, there is a strongly implied narrator presence. "Husband Betrayed" returns to the theme of "Triumph," "Yea," and "Nay"--physical possession but with souls still unmet. "Epitaph" (CF), the description of the conquering of a medieval fortress by a lone but persistent besieger, is classed among the love poems despite no mention of love or lovers; however, this classification seems to be valid when one considers that Ransom frequently describes the actions of lovers in medieval martial imagery ("Spectral Lovers" [CF, SP] and "The Equilibrists" are

examples). Also, it is in this guise of extended metaphor (the only other such extended metaphor is in "Good Ships" [CF, SP]), that Ransom, despite his great preoccupation with love themes, makes his nearest approach to a depiction of physical consummation (line 16).

Love for the Ransom character is always an ordeal, and the representation of it in martial terms is more profound than just the superficial similarity of the metaphysical conceit. One is only too tempted to compare Ransom with another poet much given to martial imagery who, like Ransom, had a humanistic training imposed on a Puritan Weltanschauung. Milton and Ransom both never really resolved the tensions between these opposing ideals with respect to erotic love. This is seen in Milton's marriages and his divorce tracts and in Ransom's failure to depict a natural, healthy, fulfilled love between the sexes, though perhaps Ransom avoided the subject because he thought it could not be handled ironically.

Concluding the love poems section is "Youngest Daughter" (CF), a poem without an explicit narrator present except for the concluding stanza in which the daughter's mother speaks. The poem is a rare instance of allegory in Ransom (being a poet working on a limited sized canvas, Ransom rarely essays the largely conceived myth or allegory) in which three reasons are given for man's inability to win Heart's Desire (the daughter): the three are--presented in the presumably climactic ordering of the poem--sexual lust, an overconcern for bourgeois propriety, and an inordinate pursuit of books.

One wonders if an autobiographical element is involved in all these love poems, but especially in those without an explicit narrator presence. It would seem logical that a careful poet when exposing himself

the most might well mask his gambit by abstaining from all appearance of a confessing "I." Engaging in the sport of extracting personal history from art is dangerous, but it is not beyond the realm of reason to suppose that the ostensibly depersonalized poems might well be the ones infused with the most personality.

The next group of unselected poems can best be classified by Vivienne Koch's phrase as "a conflict between the mythic past and the devalued present."¹⁹ More precisely we might say that they express most poignantly the conflict in the narrator between the romantic stage of intellectual development and a growing ironic-dualistic stage; maybe the terms should instead be romanticism and realism, or the ideal and the actual. Whatever kind of warring dualism one chooses, there is in the following poems a poetic dream, an aesthetic-mythic-moral ideal (foreshadowed in "The School" from Poems About God) which is challenged and often compromised by the world of practical considerations.

"Repunzel Has Submitted Herself to Fashion" (CF) shows the narrator playfully but nonetheless seriously reproaching the fairy tale girl for letting her hair be cut short in the modern vogue by

. . . the beldame [who] spat between
The crooked blades of shears,
And put her warty hands to the sheen
Of your hair, and hacked it off, and maybe hacked
your ears.

The "maybe hacked your ears" is the fine touch characterizing the narrator, the little colloquial gesture that carries an unexpected association with the ear cutting done by Puritans as punishment for the kind of romantic frivolity which the world's Rapunzels engage in.

A more serious poem, "Spring Posy" (CF), explicitly states the

ideal-real conflict:

Up once I rose in a fury of heard of things
 To travel the splendid sphere that twirleth in its fame;
 But the wars and ships and towns, and pestilent
 roaring kings,
 These angered me. . .

There is an interesting hint in the first six lines that the poetic dream world is a sublimation of a thwarted eros and that the poetic narrator has glutted his passion upon a rose, or, in this case, the spring posy. If one subscribes to the theory that art is a sort of neurotic redirecting of the libido, the poem provides supporting evidence.

The conflict between the "mythic past and the devalued present" is nowhere so forcibly set forth as in the excellent "Blackberry Winter" (CF), another one of the few unselected poems which could fit into the selected poems. Because of the elegance and stately language of lament, it is quoted here in its entirety:

If the lady hath any loveliness, let it die.
 For being drunken with the steam of Cuban cigars,
 I find no pungence in the odour of stars,
 And all my music goes out of me on a sigh.

But still I would sing to my maidenly apple tree,
 Before she has borne me a single apple of red;
 The pictures of silver and apples of gold are dead;
 But one more apple ripeneth yet maybe.

The garnished house of the Daughter of Heaven is cold.
 I have seen her often, she stood all night on the hill,
 Fiercely the pale youth clambered to her, till--
 Hoarsely the rooster awakened him, footing the mould.

The breath of a girl is music--fall and swell--
 The trumpets convolve in the warrior's chambered ear,
 But I have listened, there is no breathing here,
 And all the wars have dwindled since Troy fell.

But still I haunt beneath my apple-tree,
 Heedful again to star-looks and wind-words,
 Anxious for the flash of whether eyes or swords,
 And hoping a little, a little, that either may be.

A blackberry winter, incidentally, is a bad, cold winter, the sort of era the poet lives in. This poem is devoid of irony; there is here only the elegiac tone, a sort of last desperate hope not only for a dream vision of the classical past but of a personal past as well. Stewart writes that in Ransom's personal development of irony "He learn[ed] to live with the dream of the ideal and the dismay of the actual."²⁰ The wistfulness of the narrator longing for a mythic past, especially in the penultimate stanza, is reminiscent of another disillusioned dreamer, Prufrock, who has "heard the mermaids singing, each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me." Perhaps Ransom has omitted this poem from the selected editions because it, like "To a Lady Celebrating Her Birthday," may too directly be a confessional.

"These Winters" (CF) depicts the "blackberry winter" of old age that follows the loss of faith, the sense of challenge in the old gods, and the high ideals of youth "when the little devils of sense were frozen where/ There was such a purity of atmosphere." Though dealing with the ideal-real dualism, the poem is narrated from the point of view of an old man who is decidedly beyond the romance of the ideal but who still has something of the old longing for it.

"Semi-Centennial" (TGB) is another old man poem, and here, as in "These Winters," there is the signalling of the exhaustion of creative talent that marks the fatigue of the devalued present:

'I am a god. I may not seem to be,
The other gods have disinherited me.

'This is the patrimony of a god,
Nature's instant obedience if he nod;
But in my poverty and disrepute
I will, and have no way to execute.

And he watched, with large head resting in the sun,
 The gods at play, and did not envy one.
 He had the magic too, and knew his power,
 But was too tired to work it at that hour.

Gone here is the need to make the passionate outcry of Poems About God; there is confidence in his ability, the race seems to have been won, and, interestingly, instead of protest against God the "old fugitive" with "blue eye" has himself assumed godhead. It is as if the spirit that longed to improve on the creator's work in "Geometry" and "April" of Poems About God has had its wish, for, in what may be taken as a paean to the power of the poetic imagination, the old narrator says

'The better part of godhead is design.
 This is not theirs [the other gods'] only, for I know mine,
 And I project such worlds as need not yield
 To this commanded April on the field.

'And it is ample. For it satisfies
 My royal blood even thus to exercise
 The ancestral arts of my theogony.
 I am a god, though none attend me.'

Two other poems in this group do not have the explicit "I" narrator. "April Treason" (CF), particularly interesting because of its anapestic rhythms, depicts an artist painting an older woman and confident that "he could limn the dream aright." But he is betrayed one day in April ("the cruelest month," of course):

It was not a day for artist to play host
 Lest the man come uppermost.

 . . . the cunning all has fled his fingertips
 So he bent and kissed her lips.

In a passion he destroys the picture but afterward feels "What a bitter noon in April" it was. This poem, like the others of this group, leaves one with an uneasiness, an uncertainty. Ransom has not presented

the poem from the controlled ironic perspective which enables the reader to feel as if he has at least seen the man-artist dualism as an irreconcilable whole. The poems in this section (and, implicitly, the narrator's presence, whether he is there as an "I" or not) still seem to grasp for a monistic answer, a romantic fusion of disparities that transcends such conflicts. The mature Ransom narrator emerges only with the abandoning of this search and the accepting of dualisms with equanimity. The poems of this group document Ransom's search for an honest alternative to a romantic and monistic self-deception, a search which comes to fullest fruition in the selected poem which concludes Chills and Fever, the very fine "Philomela."

The next group of unselected poems deals with what will be referred to as quasi-autobiographical poems. They are to be sharply distinguished, though, from the naive "I" poems of Poems About God. As a group their quality is the highest of any of the unselected poems. Their narrators, while rather patently reflecting the poet's own sensibility, I feel, nevertheless perceive the dramatic situations from the ironic-dualistic stage of maturity characteristic of the selected poems.

"Plea in Mitigation" (CF), which Vivienne Koch calls "a humble and charming apologia pro sua vita,"²¹ has several autobiographical references: the narrator's not duly respecting the tall steeple (perhaps an allusion to Poems About God), his college students, but most clearly the reference to the "seven of friends," the number of Fugitives at that time. Though there are allusions to his unneighborliness and bookishness, the "I" narrator argues in his defense that he is "a head-strong man, sentenced from birth/ To love unusual gods beyond all

earth." We sense that this is the angry young man of Poems About God now grown older but nevertheless still "an alien, hideously at feud/ with those my generation."

"Amphibious Crocodile" (TGB), which Brooks says "lies very close to mere good humored self-deprecation,"²² has as its theme the futility of trying to abandon one's native roots. Both Matthiessen²³ and Buffington²⁴ note its thematic similarity to "Philomela." In the poem Mr. Robert Crocodile eschews his native bayous (reflecting the discontent with home seen in "The School" of Poems About God) and affects the life of an aesthete in France and England. (Ransom himself, one recalls, was stationed in France during World War I and studied three years at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar). But despite his leading a gay life Mr. Crocodile finds

He is too miserably conscious of his bunion
And toes too large for the aesthetic regimen.
It is too too possible he has wandered far
From the simple center of his rugged nature.

Eventually he returns home

And lies with his fathers, and with his mothers too,
And his brothers and sisters as it seems right to do;
The family religion is good enough for him.

The embracing again of the family religion from an earlier apostasy (Poems About God?) is singularly interesting in view of Ransom's 1930 prose polemic God Without Thunder, subtitled "An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy." This book documents the reasoning by which the angry young man of Poems About God appears to have returned to the faith of his fathers. There is in the poem the sense that Crocodile's return is not the return of the prodigal to grace but is rather the homecoming of one who aspired to rise to a condition for which he was not comfortable nor

equipped, but which nevertheless was an ideal. One can only speculate on the relationship between this poem and Ransom's own return to teach in his alma mater Vanderbilt in his native Tennessee after his overseas war duty and study.

In "Nocturne" (CF) more than in other of the autobiographical poems we see the dissociation of sensibility which becomes one of the dominant themes of the selected poems. The age in this poem is post-Edenic, post-Greek, and the dualistic choice of the man "in his dark seersucker coat" is "if he should carry his dutiful flesh to the ball,/ Rather than open his book, which is flat and metaphysical." And though "Much water has passed the bridges, fretfully,/ And borne his boats of passion to the sea," he is "almost persuaded, and perhaps he would go to the ball,/ If he had the heart, and the head, for a furious antique bacchanal." Like "Wintered Remembered" the poem expresses a post-conflict state of development: the heart-mind dissociation has hardened, and it is the mind that emerges as ascendent, though, as the poem says, "the white moon [i.e., the heart, the romantic capacity] plunges wildly, it is a most ubiquitous ghost/ Always seeking her own old people that are a long time lost--"

"Miller's Daughter" (TGB), "Adventure This Side of Pluralism" (CF), and "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son" (the title in the 1945 and 1955 editions but retitled "The Vanity of the Bright Young Men" in the 1963 selected poems and therefore not really one of the unselected poems) might also be included here as having autobiographical elements. What emerges about the autobiographical personality is a shy, self-conscious, bookish figure, aggressively intellectual, even vain in his independence of thought, but socially defensive, something of an outcast, and

particularly unable to articulate feelings of love, yet nonetheless longing to give up the lonely holding out and to return, with laurels, to the society which cannot understand him.

The narrator as objective commentator, which develops as Ransom's typical characteristic narrative metier as has been discussed in the previous chapter, is represented in the unselected poems by only three titles. The reason for this scarcity is, of course, that the poet chose most heavily from these poems written in the wry, ironic, yet sympathetic narrator whose insight sees the oppositions of life and death, mind and body, joy and pain in the philosophic equanimity that is so distinctively the poet of the selected work. The three poems in this group, however, are decidedly not the poet's best efforts and they wisely were left behind.

"Jack's Letter" (TGB), one of the few poems of the poet's maturity which border on the sentimental, displays the poet's distinctive diction as the narrator tells of an inarticulate fellow who tries to write his feelings to his sweetheart, "But cold and dry he finds the paper sheet/ And atrabilious and sour is ink." Here also is the narrator's sympathy for the lovers which is so pronounced in the selected "The Equilibrists" (TGB, SP):

And if I knew the gods upon the hill
I'd ask the kindest: Wet your lips and bless
The little ones that die of separateness,
Absent and impotent and unspoken still.

"Moments of Minnie" (TGB) is the narrator's reaction to the sickness and decline of a former local beauty. The opening lines are a tasteless intrusion, much like the sixth stanza of "Little Boy Blue," of the "official culture's" moralistic condemnation of the beautiful and lazy girl, but after the poet has disburdened himself of this, the

narrator sympathetically details the character study. A close scrutiny of the poem suggests, however, that combined with this sympathy is a slightly cold, analytic, almost cruel interest in the girl's demise. Something of the same thing exists in Poe's recurrent motif of morbid pleasure in the death of a beautiful woman, though, of course, Ransom's ironic treatment is calculatedly anti-sentimental. This tendency is most pronounced in "Here Lies a Lady" (CF, SP) (which has been criticized for its callousness) but it exists in several of Ransom's poems where the death of a woman is recorded, among which is "Miss Euphemia" (CF), a poem about a spinster who crept out of her house in early spring

Hearing the rumour that now
Was the bird's common tale--
Birds for all the ladies,
And husbands at church-door--

But after counting her tulips (spinsters and their flowers are a pre-occupation of Ransom's) she is "Buffeted back to prison" by the cold March winds and laughs bitterly, and the poem's last stanza reveals something of a callous note:

She had had too much of winter,
And all her ways were lost,
And she sits with us only
Till next Pentecost.

The next grouping of poems includes four titles of undistinguished quality which do not have an explicit narrator but do have characters in the poems who themselves do substantial commenting. The technique may be considered a sort of dramatic monologue or, as in "Night Voices," a dramatic dialogue. As George Wright notes, the monologue

offers the poet the opportunity to withdraw from the persona, to present as speaker a limited character with whom neither poet nor reader can be ultimately identified. . . . The persona, in short, is diminished in stature to the point where he can no longer fully represent the spirit of the poet.²⁵

As was discussed in the second chapter, Ransom seems more at ease when his inferential narrator can "fully represent the spirit of the poet"; there is that much of the romantic technique that persists in the majority of his poems. While Ransom very often lets his characters make comments, he only infrequently, as in these poems and in "Eclogue" (TGB, SP), dispenses with a narrator presence and lets the characters present their case without interpretation.

After three opening expository stanzas, "Fall of Leaf" (CF) becomes a dialogue between the "summer foresters" Dick and Dorothy, who face a winter death in the woods because of their rejection from shelter by convent and monastery. The poem is yet another episode in the dualistic contention between the ideal (the dream of the happy summer lovers) and the real (the insensitivity of religious institutions and death).

"Night Voices" (CF) is a patently dialectical debate between the Pharisee Nicodemus and Jesus, in which "the old and new Testament conceptions of the deity are presented."²⁶ The arguments on both sides are telling, and the poem makes no attempt at resolving opposite philosophies of God as hope (Jesus) and God as inexorable law (Nicodemus). The poem presents theologically the cleavage between the real and ideal seen in so many of the unselected poems.

"Lichas to Polydor: Who Rejected All His Years of Serving Cytherea" (CF) returns again to the theme of the unattainable dream and the inevitable reality. It is a reproof by Lichas to his friend for wasting his years futilely courting a goddess while the available mortal beauties passed by. It is a kind of countervailing admonition against the hubris of the self-decreed divinity of the old narrator of

"Semi-Centennial" (CF).

"On the Road to Wockensutter" (CF) is a monologue by an uneducated greasy old man expelled from the frontier Western town of Red Hole for making romantic overtures to a woman above his station. As in "Fall of Leaf" and "Lichas to Polydor," the theme is the pursuit of the ideal dream and the shattering disillusionment of failure.

The last grouping of the unselected work includes three poems, none of which is among the best, told primarily as straight narrative. What distinguishes these poems from some of the poems in the other groups which have only an implied narrator is that these are descriptions of action and not friezes of characters in a dramatic situation analyzed by a narrator.

"Winter's Tale" (CF) is a slight story of how a pet cat led a hesitant lover to his sweetheart's door. "In Mr. Minnit's House" (TGB) returns to the theme of the moralist's killing of childhood joy found in "Christmas Colloquy" of Poems About God. While implicit criticism of old Mortimer Minnit is here, there is not the criticizing narrative presence of "Christmas Colloquy," and for this reason the earlier poem seems to make its point more effectively.

The narrative sequence of twenty sonnets which concludes and gives the title to Two Gentlemen in Bonds is of most interest among the straight narrative poems. One might expect it to contain some of the best of the book's verse, but it is an almost unqualified disappointment, badly conceived and poorly executed, the sonnet form being almost the poorest kind of narrative medium.

Matthiessen says these sonnets are "a too facile expression of one of his main absorptions, the contrast between the body and the mind."²⁷

Bradbury observes that the two brothers of the sequence "represent the two equally untenable positions into which modern man is forced,"²⁸ i.e., the extremes of the dissociated sensibility. Abbott, the intellectual gone awry who is similar to the man of "Nocturne," rejects love, withdraws to a tower, and preoccupies himself with gloomy thoughts of death. Paul, on the other hand, is an athletic sensualist. While Ransom, as in "Night Voices" and in most of his poems presenting sharp dualistic contrast, makes no attempt at favoring one brother over another, a rereading suggests that there is a closer, more perceptive apprehension of Abbott than of Paul. The analysis of Abbott in the sonnet "Thought, Distraught" seems not unlike a self-caricature of the poet himself, somewhat like the narrator of "Philomela" which might supplement the autobiographical group:

Abbott proceeded soberly, with rhyme.
 He heard the lone birds' cries, and his own tongue
 Made melancholy more than the birds had sung.
 The man could talk in Latin, music, mime,
 Or sonneteer with Petrarch in his prime,
 He had a prince's powers, but what he withheld
 Was to go down to dust with the unfulfilled
 Rather than stint himself with space and time.

He was a specter gibbering under trees
 Which preened their yellow feathers, while he thought,
 'Flutter, then, flutter, for you shall fly distraught!'
 He waved his black sleeves like an evil prophet,
 Death in his every verse or not far off it;
 Far down he hung his own head, mortal as these.

The unselected poems can be viewed as the imperfect rejects of the master's workshop. Most of them can also be seen as evidence of a developing sensibility moving from a monistic romanticism to the third stage of an ironic-dualistic point of view outlined in the Fugitive essay quoted earlier. A few of these poems such as "Nocturne" (CF),

"Semi-Centennial" (TGB), and "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" signal a decline in creative tension and a falling off the creative spirit. The romantic outcry of the monistic narrator of Poems About God trying to reconcile the irreconcilable (God with Evil in this symbology) gives way in the unselected poems to a sadder but wiser narrator in the lover group who recognizes the gap of souls possessed but still unmet. The dualism of two souls unmet is, in the next group dealing with the ideal-real conflict, internalized into one person. Janus-like, these poems look wistfully backward to the monistic dream on one hand and forward to the hard acceptance of a harsh, ambiguous pluralism on the other.

The "autobiographical" poems bring this conflict home more personally. In the poems "Plea in Mitigation" (CF), "Amphibious Crocodile" (TGB), "Winter Remembered" (CF), and "Nocturne" (CF), we see what may be a process of the sensibility's being dissociated. As has already been noted, the narrator as objective commentator perceives the conflicting dualistic oppositions from the detached vantage of an ironic perspective, and the other narrative modes represented in the unselected poems--the monologue-dialogue and the pure narrative--are not particularly distinguished efforts, very possibly because Ransom cannot use his particular kind of irony without the presence of a narrator who in sensibility is very much like the poet.

Thus there seems to be the paradox that it is only when the poet through his narrator is in the poem that Ransom achieves aesthetic and ironic distance. It is as if through the medium of poetry that the poet can gain some measure of control over his experience. "Philomela" (CF, SP) provides a good example of how this takes place. The narrator of this poem is very much like John Crowe Ransom, both having been

Americans at Oxford University. In the poem the narrator tells of his disillusioning inability to respond to the English nightingale's song: "Her classics registered a little flat/ I rose and venomously spat." In the narrator's wryly humorous, ironic treatment of the young Oxonian's discovery that the richness of the European cultural heritage cannot be transplanted easily even to a bright and eager American lies the poet's own coming to terms with what almost surely must have been at one time his own personal crisis.

Significantly, the unselected poems nearly always lack the irony of "Philomela" and the other selected poems. Irony thus becomes a sort of enabling act for Ransom's best art, a point of view through which the poet and his narrator can detach himself from the situation and, paradoxically, still remain involved in it. But more than this, the mask of irony--whether in art or life--is an integrating device, a way of seeing things not as one but rather as seeing all the antinomies at once and in a balanced perspective. The ironic vision is a way of bringing together the warring fragments of the dissociated sensibility, an idea to be further explored in the next chapter.

I wish now to return to the question of the decline of Ransom's poetic productivity raised at the beginning of this discussion. Arthur Mizener suggests that Ransom's poetry dried up after the Fugitive period because he resolved the tension between body and mind when he decided that all idealizers were "Platonizers."²⁹ If one accepts Coleridge's description of the imagination as a reconciliation of opposites, Mizener's notion seems sound. At any rate, it would appear that the Abbott in Ransom more and more overcame the Paul. Perhaps this is partly to be explained by mere aging, although literary history

has a number of exceptions, Yeats perhaps being the most striking.

Though often masterfully executed, the scope of Ransom's poetry is restricted, as an ironic mode almost necessarily dictates, for irony has a contracting, understating quality. The so-called later poems, though of high quality yet not considered Ransom's best, have, generally, a more pronounced Abbott savor, indicating that Ransom's direction of development in his later years has progressed further from the finely balanced tension between the dualistic oppositions which distinguish the narrative point of view in his best poetry.

There is about John Crowe Ransom a feeling that some locked poetic potential never blossomed. Perhaps this can partially be explained by saying that his bent was more analytic than synthetic; but perhaps this also is the price of the dissociated sensibility between whose widening poles Ransom for a season struggled successfully to arch.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Poems from these two volumes, along with the seven so-called later poems, comprise all the work Ransom has considered significant enough to be reprinted in his three selected anthologies. Frederick Bornhauser's unpublished dissertation Disowned Progeny (Cornell, 1967) uncovered the interesting fact that sometime between Poems About God and Chills and Fever, Henry Holt and Company rejected two volumes of verse submitted by Ransom: a collection of sonnets entitled A Strange Woman and a book of various poems called The Handmaidens, and Other Poems. Bornhauser writes (p. 236) that "The very existence of either has never been mentioned in print by any commentator. The present whereabouts of both manuscripts is unknown; they are probably lost." He includes six heretofore unnoticed Ransom sonnets gathered from newspapers of the time and speculates that the Chills and Fever sonnets "Yea," "Nay," "Parting at Dawn," "Tall Girl," and "Good Ships" could have been survivors of the sonnet volume.

² Cleanth Brooks, et al., Conversations on the Craft of Poetry (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 81.

³ John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 250.

⁴ Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 15.

⁵ Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 246.

⁶ John L. Stewart, John Crowe Ransom (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers [Minneapolis, 1962]), p. 21.

⁷ John Bradbury, The Fugitives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 28.

⁸ Stewart, John Crowe Ransom, p. 25.

⁹ John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Scribner's, 1938), p. 238.

¹⁰ Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 223.

¹¹ John Crowe Ransom, "Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent," The Fugitive, IV (June, 1925), pp. 63-64.

¹² Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Spring, 1950), p. 229.

- ¹³ John Crowe Ransom, "Prose: A Doctrine of Relativity," The Fugitive, IV (September, 1925), p. 93.
- ¹⁴ See, for instance, the essay "Shakespeare at Sonnets," Southern Review III (Winter, 1938), pp. 531-533.
- ¹⁵ Ransom, The World's Body, p. 282.
- ¹⁶ Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 249.
- ¹⁷ Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), pp. 101-102.
- ¹⁸ Stewart, John Crowe Ransom, p. 30.
- ¹⁹ Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review LVIII (1950), p. 229.
- ²⁰ Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 220.
- ²¹ Koch, p. 235.
- ²² Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 88.
- ²³ F. O. Matthiessen, "Primarily Language," Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), p. 393.
- ²⁴ Buffington, p. 102.
- ²⁵ George T. Wright, The Poet in the Poem (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 54.
- ²⁶ Richmond Croom Beatty, "John Crowe Ransom as Poet," Sewanee Review, LII (Summer, 1944), p. 354.
- ²⁷ Matthiessen, p. 393.
- ²⁸ Bradbury, p. 32.
- ²⁹ Arthur Mizener, [an untitled review of Ransom's Selected Poems], Quarterly Review of Literature, II (No. 4, 1945), p. 369.

CHAPTER IV

THE SELECTED POEMS

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the three collected editions of Ransom's poetry--Selected Poems (1945), Poems and Essays (1955), and Selected Poems (1963)--contain, with possibly no more than a half dozen exceptions, the poet's best work. Moreover, as I have attempted to suggest earlier, Poems About God (1919) and the poems from Chills and Fever (1924) and Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927) which were not chosen for republication represent a search for an authentic narrative voice, and, concomitant with that search, is a quest for a personal philosophy which informs that narrative voice. That this two-fold inquiry bore fruit is testified to by the fine little dramatic masterpieces of the selected editions. It has also been implied that this fruition is the product of a fine balance, a dualism, between, on the one hand, the forces of the heart, body, feeling (romanticism of Ransom's second stage of intellectual development) and, on the other, the opposing powers of mind, thought, abstraction. To summarize previous arguments, Poems About God was written from a relatively naïve philosophic perspective represented by the monistic, romantic stage in which the poet and his inferential narrator struggled to reconcile the irreconcilable. The scapegoat of Poems About God was, ironically, God, a convenient source of blame to the young poet whose childhood as the son of a rural preacher must have been steeped in the doctrine of God's

omnipotence. Yet even some of the poems from Ransom's earliest volume, as I have shown, hint at the ironic mode to come. In the unselected poems the search for a philosophy and a compatible narrative voice continued, and these poems reveal an unmistakable advance in sophistication and technique. The philosophic orientation of most of them is in a state of transition between the latter stages of a monistic, romantic viewpoint and the ironic-dualistic viewpoint Ransom outlines in the Fugitive essay quoted at length in Chapter III. But a few of the unselected poems, as was noted, represent a breaking apart of the fine dualistic tension between mind and body, and these poems seem to signal a dissociation of creative sensibility, the beginning of Ransom's long poetic twilight of which the handful of so-called "later" poems are a product.

What kept the fine tension of Ransom's creativity viable was his ironic vision, his ability to feel keenly the equal pulls of what can crudely be reduced to the fundamental mind-body dualism while at the same time not capitulating to either side but condensing the essence of each into his strongly personal-flavored poetry. Donald Stauffer suggests that such a preoccupation with dualistic equilibrium is Ransom's primary archetype:

If, as Yeats believed, each artist has some symbol or set of symbols that is the image of his secret life, what is Ransom's? Is it the perilous and beautiful idea of equilibrium, the dangerous and precise starting point of warm and cold, the flames and ice in their nice orbit?¹

But an equilibrium, presuming movement as in the usual chemical association, also implies a certain futility in the back and forth motion of a closed system. The ironic perception of this futile motion of characters caught in the toils of life's dualistic equilibriums is

the typical dramatic situation of Ransom's poetry. Cleanth Brooks, in analyzing Ransom's troubled and divided characters, writes that their desperation

springs finally from the fact that they cannot attain unity of being. Childhood--the childhood of a race or of a culture--gives a suggestion of what such a unity can be, but development into maturity and specialization, break up the harmony of the faculties and leave intellect at war with emotion, the practical life with the life of sentiment, science with poetry.²

John Bradbury's comments support the idea that Ransom's characters are still in a monistic, romantic phase,

the precarious stage of innocence or of experience still unabsorbed; few of them have, like Mithradates, developed tolerance for the ubiquitous poison. The poetic personality, therefore, can observe from its ironic remove, and comment from the vantage of a superior position.³

What Ransom's characters are suffering from, and the narrator, too, to a degree, is what Robert Penn Warren⁴ first and practically every commentator since has called a "dissociation of sensibility."⁵

Vivienne Koch trenchantly perceives the relationship between Ransom's dissociated characters and his use of irony: "Irony," she writes, "in both Ransom and Eliot, is an instrument for the assimilation and the ordering of failure into an endurable scheme of existence."⁶

But while irony perhaps does have this salutary effect of making life bearable, its presence seems to signal frustration, and it becomes a sort of intellectual humor, a defense mechanism, if you will. Commenting in The World's Body about T. S. Eliot's techniques of irony and presumably referring to "The Waste Land" and earlier poems, Ransom notes that they are "disruptive" and that irony--at least Eliot's--"comes, it must come, out of a sense of a personal disintegration and

unfaith."⁷ Whether or not Ransom's irony is a result of "personal disintegration and unfaith" the poet never says, but one would suspect that all kinds of irony testify to some degree of a frustrated and fragmented experience. What I am leading up to is the suggestion--and it is no more than this--that Ransom himself and his poetic narrators also are plagued by the divided sensibility, and that all his poetry is, to use Vivienne Koch's phrase again, "an instrument for the assimilation and the ordering of failure into an endurable scheme of existence."

I have perhaps strayed too much toward the danger of constructing biography on the poet's art; yet one recalls that another poet of the metaphysical cast--the metaphysical par excellence, John Donne--was quite self-revelatory in both his amorous and his religious poetry. The criteria for distinguishing between good and bad poetry, or between romantic and metaphysical poetry, is not the degree of the presence of the poet in the poem, but rather the form in which the poet presents his material. That as a form shaping his poetry Ransom relied heavily upon the skillful use of an inferential narrator in the selected poems becomes the burden of the following pages.

For purposes of discussion Ransom's selected poems have been divided into four groups. This grouping, as that done in previous chapters, is of necessity rather arbitrary. Howard Nemerov, for instance, divides Ransom's poetry into five categories: elegies, bestiaries, fables about people, poems about lovers, and "meditative poems about art and knowledge."⁸ While Nemerov uses a sort of genre classification, the grouping in this chapter is principally thematic; this seems a more useful scheme for discussing Ransom's inferential narrators because, since the majority of the poems have an "I" narrator, what distinguishes

the narrator technique is more a matter of subject and theme than of the types of narrators such as were detailed in earlier chapters. However, the exceptions to the dominant "I" narrator pattern will be noted and will also be fitted into their appropriate thematic groups.

The four proposed groupings of the selected poems are the following: poems dealing with various irreconcilable dualisms, poems exhibiting the theme of "the devalued present and the mythic past,"⁹ poems about death and decay, and poems about lovers. These divisions may even be seen in a sort of sequential perspective: the governing concept of all Ransom's thinking is dualism; there is then the perception of the fundamental disparity between the real and the ideal, the way things are and the way they might have been; the fruit of this "devalued present" is, logically, decay and death of both soul and body; and finally, it is in the experience of love, or rather in the experience of the failure of love (for Ransom is not a love poet but rather a poet who writes of the failure of love), that the devalued present and the soul's death are most poignantly felt.¹⁰

Isabel Gamble observes that Ransom's verse deals with "the inexhaustible ambiguity of things,"¹¹ and this ambiguity is nowhere more evident than in the poems which deal with irreconcilable dualisms. Of the eleven poems in this group, six have a religious flavor, a carry-over from the intense religious preoccupation of Poems About God. But as was observed in the unselected poems, the religious dualisms broadened, and five of these poems treat dualisms in an entirely secular context.

"Necrological" (CF) is a poem without an explicit "I" narrator, but, as in the case of several of the unselected poems, there is

nevertheless a strong sense of a narrator presence. A young friar is described who, after he "said his paternosters duly," walks out in the dawn to the battlefield of the previous day where he surveys the carnage. At first he seems self-confident of his rationalizations of the dead: "it is easy he thought to die" and "the brother reasoned that hereoes' [dead] flesh was thus," but his intellectual assuredness is challenged by individual dead--a knight whose leman still clutches his knees, and a horse and rider lying dead together. Plainly disturbed by a confrontation with what Ransom would call texture or body of the situation, he

. . . sat upon a hill and bowed his head
As under a riddle, and in deep surmise
So still that he likened himself unto those dead
Whom the kites of Heaven solicited with sweet cries.

John Stewart says the poem is

a fable about a man riven by the conflict between the abstract dogma which appeals to the intellect but cannot account for the complexity of human experience and the sensuousness appeal of a life of glittering weapons and gaudy ladies which ends in meaningless destruction.¹²

To this might appropriately be added Richmond Croom Beatty's remark that the friar is "a modern man; he is the modern scholar. The divorce in his nature between action and contemplation is complete."¹³

"Armageddon" (CF) also has no explicit narrator. Like "Adventure This Side of Pluralism" it is an essay into the mythic, which is generally unfamiliar territory to Ransom, who usually writes of domestic situations. The opponents are, of course, Christ, whom Ransom refers to as "the spirit of scientific and ethical secularism of the West" in God Without Thunder,¹⁴ and Antichrist, an altogether charming fellow representative of the attractions of "the world's body." But instead

of fighting they retire to see "If they might truce their honorable dispute," for after all "Originally they were one brotherhood." The negotiations go so splendidly with each party deferring in courtesy to the other and neither needing to compromise his essence that, according to Robert Buffington, it was an association from which both could benefit, a return to prelapsarian innocence.¹⁵ But into this movement toward what might be called a healing of the dissociated sensibility comes "a patriarch,/ A godly liege of old malignant brood/ Who could not fathom the new brotherhood/ Between the children of the light and dark," and it is he who upsets the rapprochement; he is the mythic representative of the self-righteous, moralistic attitude seen in "November" of Poems About God and "Moments of Minnie" in Two Gentlemen in Bonds, one who mistakenly tries to enhance the spirit by killing the body and thus contributes to a further dissociation.

Ironically, at the end of the poem it is Christ who is depicted in militant aggressiveness chanting of "death and glory and no complaisance" while Antichrist "Made songs of innocence and no bloodshed." The defensiveness of body in the modern world is revealed in the last stanza in which Antichrist confesses, "These Armageddons weary me much."

Despite the iconoclasm of "Armageddon" Ransom's moral and religious attitudes can bear no simple labels. The sonnet "Tall Girl" (CF), for example, is patently a defense of conventional morality in the conflict between the Queens of Hell and the Queen of Heaven ("a plain motherly woman") over the allegiance of the tall girl. "Our Two Worthies" (TGB), on the other hand, returns to the satiric tone of Poems About God, though the angry narrator of those early poems has in the selected poems covered his feelings with a heavily ironic tone, a

style which Delmore Schwartz has happily described as one of "mock grandiloquence."¹⁶ The dualism of "Our Two Worthies" is between "Jesus the Paraclete/ And Saint Paul the Exegete," with the narrator concentrating his ironic attack against the Exegete's busybody officiousness which took Jesus' full body of truth and reduced it to mere formula,

Shredded it fine, and made a paste,
No particle going to waste,
Kneaded it and caked it
Buttered it and baked it
(And indeed all but digested
While Jesus went to death and rested)
Into a marketable compound. . .

And this is how the Pure Idea
Became our perfect panacea,
Both external and internal
And supernal and infernal.

The fury against abstractions which encroach on the world's body did not wane as the poet grew older; the later Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem of 1939, "Address to the Scholars of New England," keeps up the old Fugitive rage as the poet upbraids the Puritan forefathers "Who fetched the Pure Idea in a bound box/ And fastened him in a steeple." The "I" narrator seems as close as he ever is to being the poet himself, Vivienne Koch commenting that the poem "is interesting for its autobiographical witness to the impact of New England myths on the early development of the poet."¹⁷ There is in the poem, as the above quotation implies, the sense that the poet, already made susceptible to Puritan ideals because of the heavy Calvinistic strain in the Methodism of his youth, was too much in awe of the New England Puritan Weltanschauung whose "frozen fingers and unearthly honor" he mistook, to his sad discovery later, for the heights of intellectuality and holiness. The poem's conclusion, which affects a stilted, academic style characteristic of several of the later poems, seems to be the old

Ransom admonition to the "youngling bachelors" not to substitute the folly of scientific abstraction for their fathers' folly of religious abstraction: "And if there's passion [i.e., body] for half their [intellectual] flame,/ Your wisdom has done this, sages of Harvard."

"Judith of Bethulia" (CF), like "The Vagrant" (CF) and "Boris of Britain" (CF) of the unselected poems, uses to excellent effect the device of the narrator who answers questions presented to him by members of an audience. The questions, which seem to be eager interruptions, are posed in the penultimate line of each stanza and are followed by an answer in Ransom's characteristic short final line. Though the setting of the poem is Biblical and involves the destruction of the invader Holofernes by the beauty of Judith, the theme is not particularly religious: it is the puzzling dualism of how it is possible for beauty to also be a sword, of how beauty which "fevers our young men" and turns even the clergy and elders from modesty can, at the same time, "chill with fear and despair."

The effectiveness of the narrator strategy in this poem is attested to by Stewart, who observes that though Judith is legendary

she is believable because someone--not the reader but the bystander in the city--has been close enough to become inflamed and chilled, and on that authority we accept her perverse conduct without demanding more explanation.¹⁸

Perhaps the best poem of the irreconcilable dualisms group is "Painted Head," which Graham Hough says is "the most truly Metaphysical of Ransom's poems."¹⁹ Though without an explicit "I" narrator, the dramatic situation is of a narrator-like sensibility musing before the painting of a happy-faced head "On a canvas sky depending from nothing." The poem quickly leads into the relationship between head and body, the

most fundamental of Ransom's dualisms. The poet concludes that this particular head resisted the temptation to be "Absolute and to try decapitation/ And to play truant from the body bush" because it was one of the "homekeeping heads [which] are happiest." Thus, the poet says, it was a loving irony that made the artist unhouse the head, for the artist knew that this was a head devoted to the attendant body. In the closing stanzas Ransom moves to a highly explicit poetic statement of the mind-body dualism which can well be considered the keynote and summary of all his prose criticism:

The body bears the head
(So hardly one they terribly are two)
Feeds and obeys and unto please what end?
Not to the glory of tyrant head but to

The being of body. Beauty is of body.
The flesh contouring shallowly on a head
Is a rock-garden needing body's love
And best bodiness to colorify. . . .

A humorous treatment of the mind-body dualism is "Survey of Literature" (TGB) in which an "I" narrator expresses his literary tastes by comparing authors to various cuisine. Though obviously liking some authors better than others ("Aristotle,/ Pulling steady on the bottle" better than "Percy Shelley/ Drowned in pale lemon jelly"), he has no regard for the likes of Plato who writes without body:

God have mercy on the sinner
Who must write with no dinner,

No gravy and no grub,
No pewter and no pub,

No belly and no bowels,
Only consonants and vowels.

The remaining four poems of the irreconcilable dualism group are decidedly of lesser quality. "First Travels of Max" (CF), written in

blank verse, a form a bit strained for Ransom and perhaps wisely omitted from the 1945 and 1955 volumes, is a description by an implied narrator of innocence confronting evil as the boy Max makes his first sally into the diabolical Fool's Forest, at the center of which is the Red Witch "with a bosom yellow as butter." The poem mirrors an archetypal Ransom situation, the unequal struggle of "the innocent doves" up against the bewildering toils of life. As Buffington observes, there is in the poem the doctrine of original sin,²⁰ and even though Max is still a child, it is clear that sex is at the heart of the mortal coils of the forbidden forest.

"Puncture" (TGB) also deals with the contrast between innocence and experience, and returns to the narrator as young-man-instructed of Poems About God. The young soldier-narrator reacts to his older comrade's dying by angrily kicking the enemy corpses, but the veteran silently reproaches him and shows the boy how to die calmly. As Buffington points out, there is too much talk in the poem and the values are too obvious.²¹

"Spiel of the Three Mountebanks" (CF), narrated by the three principals, seems to be an enigmatic fable about the three stages of life--youth, middle age, and old age. Youth is represented by the "swarthy one" and his lean hound, middle age by the "thick one," and old age by the "pale one" with his lamb. Each animal can be conceived as typifying the way each stage handles the warring conflict of passion with reason. The relationship between the swarthy one and his fierce dog is one of "Two ends tugging at one tether," an image of Ransom's recurring equilibrium; for the thick one, libidinous forces are healthily channeled, represented by the productive elephant "With patient

strength for all his passion." But, ironically, the most puissant is the lamb (one thinks, of course, of Blake) who becomes a religious sublimation of energies.

The "lean hound" of the swarthy one returns again in "Dog" (TGB). The "I" narrator, who offers little specific indication of his theme, says that the animal noise he fears most is the "bow-wow-wow of dog," the sound associated with the angry rebel behaviour of a big dog who harrasses the "bull of gentle pedigree" and his twenty "blameless ladies of the mead" until Old Hodge, the farmer, whips the renegade to kennel. The uncontrolled libidinous force of the big dog is contrasted to the narrator's

. . . little doggie who used to sit and beg,
A pretty little creature with tears in his eyes
And anomalous hand extended on his leg;
Housebroken was My Huendchem, and so wise.

Plainly the "doggie's" spirit is broken beyond retrieval, a victim of too much human mind. Perhaps the bull becomes then a sort of Golden Mean between the extremes of the two dogs' behavior. Like Humphrey of "Spiel of the Three Mountebanks" he is productive, but he has spirit, too. However, as in all Ransom's poetry, the narrator makes few clear moral judgments: there is even some ambiguity about the nobility of the bull, and something could even be said for the iconoclastic mettle of the big dog. Though Stewart thinks the poem one of those "little whimsies meant to be no more,"²² Buffington probably more accurately perceives that it shows "the dangerous ressentiment of which Nietzsche speaks so much as the deepest motive of the weak and the mean-spirited in the presence of the noble and strong (represented in our fable by the pedigreed bull)."²³

The second grouping of the selected poems deals with the theme of the devalued present and the mythic past, a category which also appeared in the previous chapter and reflects a tension between a romantic, monistic, aesthetic, mythic, moral vision on one hand, and an ironic acceptance of the irreconcilable facts of pluralistic reality on the other. Whereas the poems of the first group demonstrated rather philosophically the irreconcilable dualisms ("Armageddon," "Painted Head," "Address to the Scholars of New England"), the poems of the second group bring to a poignant personal level the disparity between the real and the ideal, the way things are and the way they might have been.

"Vision by Sweetwater" (TGB) is a first-person narration by a man who, in witnessing a picnic party of girls, has his imagination triggered to an archetypal remembrance of beauty:

Where have I seen before, against the wind,
These bright virgins, robed and bare of bonnet,

Flowing of music of their strange, quick tongue
And adventuring with delicate paces by the stream,--

But the vision is broken suddenly by a girlish scream (undoubtedly nothing serious) and the narrator, who for a moment had captured something of the freshness and innocence of childhood, is old again. Interestingly, Ransom here and elsewhere portrays his ideal world in classical Greek imagery--examples include "The School" from Poems About God, "Blackberry Winter" (CF), and "Philomela" (CF, SP). This, of course, may well be expected of one whose training at both Vanderbilt and Oxford was heavily classical.

"Old Man Playing With Children" (CF), one of Ransom's most delightful efforts, has as "I" narrator the same sort of apologist who defended the principals of "The Vagrant" (CF) and "Boris of Britain" (CF).

He presumes to "unriddle for you the thought" of a grandfather who, to the consternation of his son, is in warpaint and feathers "Dancing round a backyard fire of boxes" with his grandsons:

'It is you the elder and younger to me
Who are penned as slaves to properties and causes
And never walk from your insupportable houses
And shamefully, when boys shout, go in and flee.

'May God forgive me, I know your middling ways,
Having taken care and performed ignominies unreckoned
Between the first brief childhood and the brief second,
But I will be more honorable in these days.

The mythic past, as was argued in the previous chapter, is not just an historical but is also a personal phenomenon, one that Ransom frequently associates with childhood and, as in this poem, old age. Ransom, like Edgar Lee Masters and E. A. Robinson, though often speaking as the autobiographical analyzer of the complex, intellectual personality, is equally interested in speaking for the the inarticulate.

A prime exemplar of the joy-killing of the "middling ways" is seen in Ralph of the omnisciently narrated "Morning" (TGB), who awakens and for a drowsy moment lives in the joyous spontaneity of "blue air" and the enchantment of a spring morning. But

Suddenly he remembered about himself,
His manliness returned entire to Ralph;
The dutiful mills of the brain
Began to whirl with their smooth-grinding wheels. . .
He rose and was himself again.
Simply another morning, and simply Jane.

"Manliness" here, of course, is used ironically, and the "smooth-grinding wheels" is a masterful image implying both the crushing of body by the industrialism Ransom reviled in his Agrarian writing, and the effect of the industrial world's turning the mind of man into a machine.

"Captain Carpenter" (CF), one of Ransom's best known poems, is a rollicking first-person description of a Quixotic figure who carries to

an excess the attitude of the grandfather of "Old Man Playing With Children." Commenting upon the poem, Ransom himself has said,

I don't know whether it means anything beyond what it says
 I've been asked if he could have represented the
 Old South, Or if he could have stood for the old time reli-
 gion. But those ideas did not enter my mind when I was com-
 posing the little ballad.²⁴

Carpenter's fault, like Quixote's and perhaps Jesus' too
 (Buffington suggests that carpenter may be a religious symbol²⁵), is
 that he stands for an anachronistic value system of the ideal chivalric
 past which, while noble, cannot survive in the devalued present. The
 values of the devalued present are epitomized by "the neatest knave
 that ever was seen/ Stepping from his lady's bower," who very ungener-
 ously defiles and kills the well-meaning old gallant. The narrator,
 as an ironic dualist, sees the folly of Carpenter's actions and the
 much greater evil of the perfumed knave. What is disturbing about the
 poem, which the narrator addresses to undefined "Sirs," is the blending
 of the rollicking levity of the modified ballad meter and the quixotic
 comedy with the violent horror of the old knight's dismemberment and
 vivisection. Here, as in "Miss Euphemia" (CF) of the previous chapter,
 there seems to be something a bit sadistic in the narrator as he de-
 tails the cruelty, and the reader feels that perhaps he also is enjoy-
 ing too much Carpenter's debacle. Nor is the ambivalence between sym-
 pathy and sadism abated by the heavy curse the narrator casts upon the
 murderous dandy, for the last lines savor too much the images of horror:

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart
 That got the Captain finally on his back
 And took the red red vitals of his heart
 And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

This poem illustrates again the complexity and ambiguity of Ransom's

attitude; the sympathy toward even the innocent doves is not absolute-- it is, rather, conditioned by an ironic tone.

"Prometheus in Straits" (CF), which has affinities with the autobiographical "Semi-Centennial" (TGB) whose old narrator declares himself a god, is an "I" narration by the mythic figure who brought man fire and other blessings. Yet after witnessing the inanities and banalities of modern men, the old Titan muses that "my mind may have wandered/ To bring pious offices to this people." His climactic discouragement comes in his visit to colleges where he hears the masterpieces discussed:

Before your explications respect ceased
For the centers lost in so absurd circumference;
You have only betrayed them by your exegesis
And provoke me to gestures not of deference.

These lines seem to indicate an autobiographical note; one recalls that Ransom was one of the leading proponents of literary formalism in the colleges, that method of criticism which sought to focus attention on the literature itself and away from the "absurd circumference" of historical and textual scholarship. Prometheus concludes his sad musing by retreating to a streamside and raising an altar to an ideal Unknown Man.

In "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom" (TGB) the narrator also seeks an ideal race, in this poem a kingdom of personified birds. Birds in Ransom's poetry, as Knight observes, can symbolize "the unity of nature."²⁶ Buffington notes that "Ransom uses the simplicity of animals to set off the human dilemma of living in contradictory worlds."²⁷ The narrator has apparently had his nerves subjected to a battering by quarreling people and, retreating to his study, wonders if the harmony

and happiness of the birds indicates that somewhere (perhaps in the mythic past?) was a happy kingdom of men. The narrator displays the characteristic bookishness, the slightly pedantic diction, and what also may be construed as unsociability seen in the autobiographical unselected poems "Plea in Mitigation" (CF), "Nocturne" (CF), and "Miller's Daughter" (TGB).

"What Ducks Require," one of the later poems written since Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds, is a narratorless description of the simple amenities of wild ducks who, of course, require very little in their harmonious living in nature. Though the theme of the poem is not overt, there are implicit Agrarian values: the ducks are uncorrupted by industrialization and urbanization, and their bodies and spirits live close to nature. Buffington feels that the poem's theme is the D. H. Lawrence idea from Women in Love of "Thank God the universe is nonhuman,"²⁸ but one might as easily argue that Ransom is using birds here as he did in "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom" and elsewhere as personified ideals. At any rate, the closing lines of the poem--containing some of Ransom's most remarkable imagery--seem by means of their pathetic fallacy to have more affinity with the human spirit than with the nonhuman:

Prodigious in his wide degrees
Who where the winds and waters blow
On raveling banks of fissured seas
In reeds nestles, or will rise and go
Where Capicornus dips his hooves
In the blue chasm of no wharves.

The two following poems relate the devalued present and the mythic past to the Old and New South. Stewart comments that while Ransom is

"truly a southern writer," his

regional qualities are to be found in his style and his vision rather than his subjects, for in all his career he has published only four poems treating specifically southern themes or backgrounds.²⁹

Stewart, incidentally, does not specify which four. Bradbury observes that on one level Ransom's verse "must be read as an extended allegory, or symbolic version, of a dying way of life, stricken in the midst of its charm."³⁰

The "I" narrator of "Old Mansion" (CF) tells of trying to get in to visit an old southern house which long had intrigued him. His request refused by the recluse mistress, he disappointedly returns to the harshness of the present: "and I went with courage shaken/ To dip, alas, into some unseemlier world." Knight offers the following incisive comment about the narrator and the irony of his situation:

The speaker is an outsider, one who appears to be an affluent man observing improvidence. His curiosity leads him to knock on the door, 'To beg their dole of a look, in simple charity,/ Or crumbs of legend from their great store.' The metaphor makes him a beggar who comes seeking aid from the wealthy, thus reversing the materialistic relationships set up in the surface of the poem. The irony of a rich man who is poor looking at decay which is wealthy embodies the central theme of the poem: the South is rich in tradition and culture, and material wealth is not a substitute for those values.³¹

Of "Antique Harvesters" (TGB) Ransom has said, "This is my Southern poem."³² The tone is one of dignified requiem as the old men, of whom the narrator is one, admonish the young not to "Forsake the Proud Lady," obviously the values of the Old South, despite the fact that "Declension looks from our land, it is old." Though the narrator admits the Lady has aged, he says that "if you peep shrewdly, she hath not stooped," which, incidentally, describes the elderly Ransom himself--white-haired, spare, but nonetheless erect, the very embodiment

of the Old South gentleman.

The six poems concluding the devalued present and mythic past group are more clearly marked by an autobiographical strain. They are arranged roughly in order of what appears to be the narrator's age; looked at together, these poems, along with the autobiographical poems of the unselected group, constitute something of a survey of the poet's sensibility from young manhood to old age. Ransom, I would argue, got a great deal of himself into these poems, and it is in these poems particularly that evidence of the narrator's dissociated sensibility is most manifest.

"Philomela" (CF) is a minor masterpiece, surely one of the half-dozen best of Ransom's poems. It, more than any other of Ransom's poems, combines the devaluation theme of both the historical and the personal; in it the historical devaluation is specifically the failure of the Western cultural tradition to transplant to America, and the personal devaluation, which is related to the historical, is the narrator's inability to respond to the symbolic nightingale, whose "classics registered a little flat" despite his "capacious" (i.e., trained extensively in the classics) ear. The poem has strong similarities to "The School" from Poems About God and "Amphibious Crocodile" from Two Gentlemen in Bonds, both of which relate the Jamesian sense of inferiority of the young American in the European cultural milieu. The theme of all of these poems is not "You can't go home again" after exposure to a richer heritage, but rather that you cannot, for all the "pernoctating" with Oxonians, ever really leave the native roots.

Something very much like the experience related in "Philomela" must have happened to Ransom. Commenting on Ransom personally with no

particular reference to "Philomela," Hough writes that

he is not going to adopt Europe's course, abandon his father's folk and apply for artificial respiration to European culture and the Anglican church. He does what he must do--accepts his native but not very promising heritage of scenes and images and characters, and by the aid of an unconventional, idiosyncratic, but wide and eclectic literary culture of his own, makes that heritage into a workable poetic convention.³³

The narrator of "Philomela" fails to respond to the nightingale because he, like his countrymen who are divided into Abbots and Pauls (in this poem the "bantering breed sophisticated" and the "swarthy"), suffers from the dissociated sensibility. Obviously the narrator is of the "bantering breed sophisticated," but he has, as Buffington notes, perspective enough to direct some of the poem's irony to himself.³¹ And it is really the narrator himself, I should argue, who is the recipient of the ironical caricaturing of the pedantic college professor which Samuel H. Woods, Jr. perceives; Woods also observes that another edge of the poem's irony cuts the narrator's search for poetic beauty when he was a young man.³⁵ This, of course, is entirely appropriate for one who is looking back from an ironic-dualistic perspective to the monistic, romantic viewpoint which characterized a callow stage of intellectual development which Ransom described in the Fugitive essay quoted in Chapter III.

Writing about Ransom's poetry in general, Knight asserts that

Ransom himself is apparently caught in the trap of modernism. . . . [he] yearns for an age of myth, but he belongs to the wrong time. And the same dilemma is reflected in his critical writings, wherein he is a philosophical intellectual straining toward non-intellectualism. Ransom's predicament suggests Yeats' profound observation: 'We make out of our quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.'³⁶

"Philomela," along with "Plea in Mitigation" (CF), would seem to be

central documents in Ransom's attempt to come to terms with himself through an ironic self-examination.

"The Vanity of the Bright Young Men" is another poem whose basis seems to be Ransom's Oxford days. Originally titled "Tom, Tom the Piper's Son" in Chills and Fever and the 1945 and 1955 collections, it has undergone extensive revision by Ransom, whose inveterate tinkering usually is fortunate.³⁷

The narrator of the poem is not, as in "Philomela," looking back with irony on the earnest young scholar; instead, he is the intensely self-conscious, romantic young man afflicted by delusions of his own grandeur, and the irony in the poem is perceived by the reader alone and is not shared between reader and narrator as in most of the selected poems. His is the same personality of "Plea in Mitigation" (CF) and "Nocturne" (CF): "I'm removed, a boy reported not liking people,/ My familiars mostly are books." Rejecting the world as it is, he goes to seek the romantic ideal:

But afternoons I walk in the primal creation,
In a spell, in a possible glory,
Counting on nature to give me an intimation
Of my unlikely story.

He does one time get his intimation of immortality when he imagines hearing "certain Druid trees" speaking of him as a changeling prince from a far great kingdom; nevertheless, his return to his college is the anticlimactic return to reality found in "Old Mansion" and "Philomela." It is the old and painful disparity between the ideal and the real, the manic-depressive syndrome of dissociation:

And prompt I showed, as the tower's last throb appointed,
In the loud and litten room,
Nor was hailed by that love that leaps to the Heir Anointed:
'Hush, O hush, he is come.'

"Persistent Explorer" (TGB), though lacking a specific "I" narrator, clearly fits into the autobiographical real versus ideal poems because it so forcefully brings home the philosophical dilemma of the poetic dream and the scientific reality which is one of Ransom's archetypal conflicts. The poem appears to catch the subject at the critical moment when he is beyond the romantic idealism of the undergraduate of "The Vanity of the Bright Young Men" and is at the point of discovering what has been called in this study ironic-dualism.

The dramatic situation of the poem involves the explorer's pursuing the sound of falling water to a great cataract whose magnificent spectacle teases his mind to imaginative visions of gods and goddesses and of the whole range of animistic, mythic, and religious associations. Yet he consciously beats down such associations, for he is a "persistent" explorer, one not willing to settle for "anything less than the complete experience,"³⁸ and the complete experience is not in romantic surrender to the pathetic fallacy, comfortable and delightful though that might be. He realizes that he must also come to terms with science (a term much broader than the academic sciences meaning to Ransom something like purely intellectual analysis). Showing this hard strain of intellectual honesty, the poet writes:

Tremendous the sound was but there was no voice
That spoke to him. Furious the spectacle
But it spelled nothing, there was not any spell
Bidding him whether cower or rejoice.

This rejection of romantic animism creates a Hemingway nada world of "nothing but," but the explorer-poet goes ahead to admit the existential irony of his dilemma and summons what must be considered the courageous decision of existentialism:

So be it. And no unreasonable outcry
 The pilgrim made; only a rueful grin
 Spread over his lips until he drew them in;
 He did not sit upon a rock and die.

There were many ways of dying; witness, if he
 Commit himself to the water, and descend
 Wrapped in the water, turn water at the end
 And flow with a great water out to sea.

But there were many ways of living too,
 And let his enemies gibe, but let them say
 That he would throw this continent away
 And seek another country,--as he would do.

Or, in other words, the "rueful grin" signals the moment of insight in-
 to the intellectual error of dying by committing himself to the water
 (the easy capitulation to the pathetic fallacy) and the resolve to
 find "another country," which, subsequently, turns out to be the ironic-
 dualism which Ransom rather self-consciously opposed to the sentimental
 poetry popular in the South. Also, in the "rueful grin" of the explor-
 er's experience is a clue perhaps to the origin of Ransom's irony.

"Agitato ma non troppo" (CF), a brief "I" narrator poem, might be
 considered a statement of the personal aftermath of the existential dis-
 covery in "Persistent Explorer." Its theme, implicit in the title, is
 explicitly stated in the last stanza:

I will be brief,
 Assuredly I know my grief,
 And I am shaken; but not as a leaf.

Stewart reports that Ransom is quite insistent that the poem is not
 about himself, despite the fact that the Fugitives who first heard it
 thought that it was.³⁹ In what was probably a move to depersonalize
 the poem (though as was argued in the previous chapter, such a tactic
 may be a mask for what is particularly autobiographical), Ransom added
 in the 1963 collection the following: "This is what the man said,/"

Insisting, standing on his head."⁴⁰ The upside down posture is enigmatic; perhaps it means that the narrator admittedly is seeing the world from a completely different perspective, one that is not in much vogue with the sentimental overreaction to grief that the poem disparages.

"Conrad in Twilight," which appeared as "Conrad Sits in Twilight" in Chills and Fever, and its lengthened revision "Master's in the Garden Again," are both included in the Selected Poems of 1963. Perhaps both versions are published because the poet wanted to impress the reader with his tinkering virtuosity; Ransom writes in the essay concluding the 1963 volume that "when an old poem comes up for republication, [he] like[s] to induce the whole delicious process of composition over again, and even try to make a few fresh beauties here and there. . . ."⁴¹ Conrad, of course, is the poet in the twilight of old age, and the first person narrator in both poems is sympathetic toward the old man who risks his health by defying entreaties (which are his wife's as the revision makes clear) to come into his comfortable house instead of sitting in the autumn evening, "His lungs filling with such miasma,/ His feet dipping in leafage and muck." Nevertheless, he remains where he is and persists in pursuit of an old dream: "Nursing his knees, too rheumy and cold/ To warm the wraith of a Forest of Arden." The notion that surrendering to the cozy comfort inside is an ignoble compromising of one's ideals and dreams also occurs, as we have seen in Chapter III, in "These Winters (CF)". In the revision Conrad's askew resemblance to a Tennysonian Ulysses is changed to something approaching the spirit of Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" ("If the arm lies low, yet the rage looks high"). But the

picture of Conrad is not one of unrelieved nobility; there is also the irony of the narrator who perceives the Captain Carpenter-like folly of the old man making a brave show.

One might argue that the poet through his inferential narrator is making an ironic insight into himself. In neither version, though, is Conrad a fool or a Greek hero--he is merely Conrad the complex. In this poem, as in all of Ransom's, the narrator in depicting the desperate coexistence of the fragile dream and the shattering reality never accedes to Byronic posing or Shelleyan bleeding; he is always the "persistent explorer" seeking all the possible human values: the sympathetic, the ironic, the comic, the pathetic, and, even though attenuated in Ransom, the tragic.

The nine poems of the third grouping of the 1963 Selected Poems--concerned with the theme of decay and death--include several which are among the poet's most frequently anthologized and best known work. Decay and death imply in Ransom's poetry not only a loss of physical but also spiritual potency, an inevitable outcome of the devalued present discussed in the preceding section. Commenting upon Ransom's many poems about death, Richmond Croom Beatty says "one will observe about them that which attracts Ransom is that of unfulfillment; his characters have not successfully realized themselves as human beings."⁴² Implying the ubiquitous life and death dualism, Isabel Gamble asserts that Ransom's subject is

the war of death with life. . . . What is there to set against all this grief? Only the acceptance of brutal fact: that the perilous closeness of death is a sign of life, that life is not good but in danger and joy--in a word, courage.⁴³

Ransom himself has said

. . . the great subject of poetry, the most serious subject, is death--and there's no recourse from death, except that we learn to face it, and to get on speaking terms with it, and then to have the characters who leave us pass as magnificently as possible.⁴⁴

"Her Eyes" (TGB) is a little study of a pair of eyes which, ironically, have not decayed and bleared with age. After an implied praising of these eyes (which are blue, Ransom's color symbolizing fulfillment), the first person narrator contrasts the eyes with eyes of members of his family, and then moves to hard questions, asking how these eyes managed to avoid "the monstrous sun," "the wind's flare," the poison of artificial light; and finally

. . . had the splendid beast no heart
That boiled with tears and baked with smart
The ocular part?

The narrator concludes with a rejection of the eyes because

They are not kind, they are not wise,
They are two great lies.

A woman shooting such blue flame
I apprehend will get some blame
On her good name.

The poem commands interest for its unresolved competing points of view: the narrator admires the woman's innocent-dove purity, yet in Ransom's world innocence is vulnerable, and painful disillusion brings wisdom. The concluding idea in the last two lines seems to satirize the narrator's own moralistic view, but at the same time behind the easy moralization he sees that inevitably her innocence will hurt her. A good part of the irony of the poem is created by the contrast between the stanzaic form--flippant triplets with clipped third lines--and the basically serious comment that the poet makes about the dangers of exposed innocence.

"Blue Girls" (TGB) is narrated by a middle-aged man memorably uttering the old poetic theme of the mutability of woman's beauty. The poem implores the blue-skirted, white-filleted coeds to "Practice your beauty. . . before it fail." A minor imperative, "Go listen to your teachers old and contrary/ Without believing a word" (the narrator himself may well be their professor) provides the sort of humorous irony that puts the main and serious point into sharp and unsentimental relief. In the poem's last stanza it is clear that the reason for the narrator's imperatives is grounded in his own hard experience:

I know a lady with a terrible tongue,
 Blear eyes fallen from blue,
 All her perfections tarnished--yet it is not long
 Since she was lovelier than any of you.

The dualistic contrast in the poem is, of course, between the spontaneous girls, symbolically identified with bluebirds, and "the blear-eyed lady with terrible tongue," whom Knight feels represents older, intellectual people and introduces the theme of body-mind dissociation into the poem.⁴⁵ At any rate on rereading, it is the narrator and not the girls and the woman who command the most interest. We see his balanced, healthy maturity--objective yet sympathetic, kindly instructing, serious and yet ironically playful--unobtrusively presenting and controlling the situation.

The narrator of "Vaunting Oak" (CF), an experiment in terza rima, uses a mighty oak for instruction in "much mortality." His betrothed, "wrapped in a phantasy of good," likens their love to the oak's durability, but the narrator, "an unbeliever of bitter blood," i.e., a realist who has moved beyond his fiancée's romantic stage, instructs her by knocking on the tree's trunk, whose reverberating, hollow, and

funereal tone contrasts sharply with the birds, leaves, and flowers of the spring setting.

"Piazza Piece" (TGB) is a sonnet dialogue, the octave spoken by "a gentleman in a dustcoat" and the sestet by a lady. The gentleman, related no doubt to Dickinson's gentleman in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," is both personified death and also another instructor of "much mortality":

But see the roses on your trellis dying
And hear the spectral singing of the moon;
For I must have my lovely lady soon. . . .

She replies, in the characteristic romantic and sentimental fashion which reflects the attitude the gentleman is trying so hard to correct:

--I am a lady young in beauty waiting
Until my truelove comes and then we kiss.

The poem might well be the narrator's post-graduate course to the blue girls, and the lady's response, a threatened scream, would shatter her romantic dream just as did the girlish scream in "Vision by Sweetwater." But it is just this sort of shattering insight that the reasonable gentleman wants from the lady, for, as Stewart observes about the poem, it "wittily has exposed the sentimental idealism of the stories by which her dearest values are nurtured."⁴⁶ The poem also is an excellent illustration of Buffington's remark that "When Ransom writes of death he keeps it at a distance by keeping its victim at a distance. . . not at a 'safe distance,' but at a dignified distance."⁴⁷

The narrator of the superb little poem "Janet Waking" (TGB) masterfully preserves the pathos of a child's first encounter with death while escaping any appearance of making a tragedy out of the demise of a pet chicken--this is primarily accomplished through a half-comic diction which, however, lacks the mocking tone of Ransom's more pointed

irony (note, for instance, Ransom's playful use of adverbs). Little Janet's initial reaction of shock, like the lady of "Piazza Piece," is one that incredulously rejects death:

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, 'Wake her from her sleep!'
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

But Janet will learn the dualism of the living and of those "Translated far beyond the daughters of men"; the experience, as Brooks notes, is an episode in her education.⁴⁸

Regarding the narrator technique, Hough distinguishes three points of view in the poem; they are the views of

Janet, Janet's father, who is affectionately sympathetic; and that of a detached and slightly quizzical observer who also inhabits Janet's father's skin, who cannot help knowing how small a place in the scheme of things is occupied by the death of hens.⁴⁹

"Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" and "Dead Boy" deal with the death of children, a subject which a lack of firm control could easily make sentimental. Yet Ransom never loses his poetic grip, and the use of the narrator in these poems is near perfection.

In "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" (CF) the narrator, who seems to be a close friend and neighbor to the stricken family, structures the poem in the typically Ransom dualistic oppositions: the speed of the girl's little body and the "lightness of her footfall" are set off against her "primly propped" brown study, which in the absence of the lively child "sternly stopped" and "vexed" the kindly narrator. One should perhaps note those two verbs--they have the surprising and colloquial cast of Ransom's ironic diction, but they do not at all connote either a flippancy toward the pathos of the situation on the one hand, nor the sentimentality which the sight of the dead child's empty

room might arouse. Such is the art of a consummate equilibrist.

Another contrast in the poem is between the animating spirit of the child (much like that of "Little Boy Blue" in Poems About God) and the "sleepy and proud" geese

Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little
Lady with rod that made them rise
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle
Goose-fashion under the skies!

The geese, whose forced "scuttling" is paralleled by one long breathless three stanza sentence, seem to be identified with the narrator's generation; the narrator himself was perhaps at times such a harried goose when visited by the child, for he says, "Her wars were bruited in our high window." In the recognition of the animating spirit of her "tireless heart" and its reproach to adult torpidity, and not in attempts at tragic overtones, does the narrator pay high and appropriate tribute to the little girl.

The "I" narrator of "Dead Boy" might well be considered the example par excellence of all Ransom's poetry: in complexity of points of view, in the distilling of the maximum number of values in the minimum number of lines, in the fine control of what Knight calls the "objective examination" and the "subjective compassion"⁵⁰--in all these the poem is superb.

Stewart comments that the narrator "assumes the persona of a sympathetic but somewhat obtuse observer."⁵¹ The "obtuse" must have reference to the narrator's pejorative remarks about the boy, because, for all his sympathy, he sees the boy as he really was,

A boy not beautiful, nor good, nor clever,
A black cloud full of storms too hot for keeping,
A sword beneath his mother's heart. . . .

A pig with a pasty face, so I had said,
Squealing for cookies, kinned by poor pretense
With a noble house.

However, the evening-up, contrasting element appears, as it almost always does in this poet so preoccupied with dualistic equilibrium:

But the little man quite dead
I see the forbears' antique lineaments.

In addition to the narrator's point of view, "the world of outer dark, like me" (a phrase itself fraught with interesting connotations about the Ransom narrator), there are the viewpoints of the "county kin," the boy's mother, the old men (whom Buffington calls the Virginia patriarchs⁵²), the neighbors, and the preacher.

The narrator of "Dead Boy" appropriately does not attempt at a tragic effect for the child's death, but instead achieves a ritualistic, elegiac intonation which, as in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," is a perfect matching of mood with the occasion.

"Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" (CF) and "Here Lies a Lady" (CF) both deal with death, but there is something of a lighter tone in both. Ironically, the death of adults does not inspire the elegiac tone in Ransom that is seen in the deaths of children.

The lightness of "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" derives largely from the anapestic rhythms of its meter, which Buffington identifies as the fourteenner popular in the sixteenth century.⁵³ The narrator is one of Miss Emily's unsuccessful suitors who "beautifully trusted/ If the proud one had to tarry we would have her by default." Unlike her sisters, "being unbelievers both" who married merchants, Emily holds out for the romantic dream; but ironically "right across her threshold has her Grizzled Baron come," a personage resembling the dustcoated gentleman of "Piazza Piece." The last two lines of the poem make clear that

the "stately ceremonial" of the opening stanza is, ironically, a nuptial with death. One observes that here and in the other poems about death, the narrator has carefully not made death itself the central subject, but rather the situation surrounding the death.

Of "Here Lies a Lady" (CF), a poem about an aristocratic woman's succumbing to "six little spaces of chill, and six of burning," Thornton Parsons writes that Ransom

... chooses to end the poem with a tone so cold that it seems non-human. This may be consistent with the poet's many detached and objective effects, but it seems like a contrived flight from the legitimate human emotion that we are invited to share in the second stanza. In combatting the sentimental elegy Ransom has been caught in the counter-trap of callousness and non-human detachment.⁵⁴

This statement seems to support the point made in Chapter III that along with the sympathy there is in Ransom a bit of a streak of sadistic morbidity: Why, for instance would a person from the "world of outer dark" even go to the dead boy's funeral, and is there, along with a normal curiosity, a fascination for decay and death in "Old Mansion"?

Fred Stocking analyzes the first person narrator's response to the lady's death as a blend of three feelings: genuine sorrow induced by the lady's death; respect for the values cherished by all ladies of high degree; and an awareness that these values can be seen as superficial, even mildly comical.⁵⁵ As is usual in Ransom's practice, the comic-ironic note is injected by the diction ("medicos marvelling sweetly on her ills," "Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole"). The archaic diction, Brooks notes, probably thinking particularly of thole (Old English meaning "to endure") gives a tone of "tough-minded modernity,"⁵⁶ the same sort of effect Hemingway achieves through machine-gun like staccato sentences.

Of the last stanza, in which the narrator asks of the departed lady, "But was she not lucky?" Bradbury incisively comments:

One imagines the pretty listeners murmuring polite 'Wasn't she's?' before full comprehension occurs. The whole flavor of this passage, and Ransom manages many like it, is that of an aloof and perfectly mannered gentleman playing the social game on his own sophisticated level, above the heads of his character-auditors.⁵⁷

Though the Ransom narrator often uses a slightly mocking tone, this passage among all the selected poems is the nearest approach to satire. But perhaps the object of his attack--if such it is--is not the dead lady but the conventional attitude of huge mystery (represented by the fatuous "Sweet ladies") with which death is surrounded; Buffington remarks that

Life and death are seen in this poem not even as a mystery, but as a little puzzle, like the maze of laces in which the lady sits when in her feverish state.⁵⁸

And lest we think Ransom's attitude toward death too casual, Shakespeare reminds us that

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Life, after all, even for the beautiful and high-born, is just such a strutting and fretting, a burning and chilling, and the most one can really have at the close of it all is the dead lady's luck--to be buried by friends surrounded by "flowers and lace and mourning."

The last of the four categories into which the selected poems have been divided in this chapter is the love poem group. Ransom, though, is anything but a Cavalier lyricist, for, as Knight observes, "A surprising number of Ransom's poems are ostensibly love poems, but usually in such poems love is used to treat the pathetic plight of modern

man."⁵⁹ Implying as they do the irreconcilable dualisms of the dream of life with the disillusioning reality and the inevitability of beauty's decay and death, Ransom's love poems present the archetypal situation of troubled lovers to illustrate the dissociated sensibility with its inability to bring into harmonious relationship the mind and body. "The overwhelming burden of his poetry," says Knight again, "is that failure is a condition of modernity."⁶⁰ Knight also feels that love is the predominant symbol in Ransom's poetry and constitutes "the symbolic act which indicates the fullness or coherence of man's grasp of his world."⁶¹ Because of their importance in theme and symbol, and also because they include so many of the ideas of the three previous groups, the love poems are discussed in a climactic final position.

"Miriam Tazewell" (CF) and the later poem "Of Margaret" are very similar in conception and tone. Both of the principals are apparently spinster women who have sublimated their maternal love into flowers and leaves, and both grieve when their botanical progeny suffer from storms and winds. The tone of the narrator in "Miriam Tazewell" is ambivalent: at once he is the sympathetic and patient instructor (note the unexpected nominative of address in the second stanza as he tries to explain and comfort Miriam about the storm), but also he seems to be gently mocking her displaced and pathetic womanhood in the description of her flowers in terms of a sexual violation:

After the storm she went forth with skirts kilted
To see in the strong sun her lawn deflowered,
Her tulip, iris, peony strung and pelted,
Pots of geranium spilled and their stalks naked.

"Of Margaret" is perhaps the most emotionally satisfying of all Ransom's poems and obviously received its impetus from Hopkins' "Spring

and Fall" which begins "Margaret, are you grieving/ Over Goldengrove unleaving?" Though in the Hopkins' poem Margaret is a child, Ransom's Margaret seems an unmarried older woman whose life remained unfulfilled for the lack of a human love. Mellowier than the sympathy qualified with irony seen in other thwarted spinsters such as "Miss Euphemia" (CF), "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" (CF, SP), and "Miriam Tazewell," the narrator presents the maiden lady who mourns the fall of leaves in autumn as if they were her own children. But there is little or no irony in Ransom's presentation of this vegetable love, and the narrator is unreservedly her apologist:

But no evil shall spot this, Margaret's page,
For her generations were of the head,
The eyes, the tender fingers, the blood,
And the issue was all flowers and foliage.

Such a pure love carries religious associations (prefigured perhaps by the Eucharistic "wafer body" leaves), and the last stanza involves associations of both Mary the mother of Jesus and the Greek ideal of woman seen in "Vision by Sweetwater" (TGB, SP):

Virgin, whose image bent to the small grass
I keep against this tide of wayfaring,
O hear the maiden pageant ever sing
Of that far away time of gentleness.

The dignity and classic tone of "Of Margaret" mark its narrator as the complete antithesis of the angry voice from Poems About God who cried out as a Shelley might against the "tide of wayfaring." The poem reveals what the poet might have produced more of had the goads of hard dualisms not given his style an ironic twist.

"Old Man Pondered" (which first appeared in the June 15, 1929 Saturday Review of Literature) ostensibly is about another unwedded, aged personage who illustrates the idea that it is better to have loved

and lost than never to have loved at all. The narrator, accompanied by "one who is fair and gentle," observes that the same old man crossed their path three times during a stroll without ever looking up, "But strictly watched his own predicaments." Another of the "bright young men" he wonders why the old man's eye became "monstered in its fixed intent" and speculates that it was because he had defensively shut himself to both hate and love. The old man gives the narrator cause for pondering

What age must bring me; for I look round bold
And seek my enemies out; and leave untold
The sideways watery dog's-glances I
Send fawning on you, thinking you will not scold.

The old man who is pondered thus becomes a long prelude to what is really a poem about the narrator, who is much like the insecure suitor of "Miller's Daughter" (TGB) and the irresolute young man of "Nocturne" (CF). When Knight says of "Old Man Pondered" that it is "a poem which through dramatic irony foreshadows the failure of the narrator,"⁶² he speaks with equal propriety about several poems having the narrator involved in a romantic situation about which he cannot act decisively. It should be pointed out, however, that the narrator as victim of dramatic irony is exceptional in Ransom's poetry. As observed in Chapter I, the more typical Ransom narrator perceives and shares with the reader (much as if with a fellowship of peers) the ironic values of the situation.

"Parting Without Sequel" (TGB), though without an explicit narrator, shows the failure in love of a young woman who has just delivered into the hands of "the blue-capped functioner of doom" a farewell letter to her lover. Seeking consolation from "her father's vaunting oak, she

hears it reproaching her, "the wan daughter by the lintel" (another attempt by the poet to intone the mythic past). As she watches the snake-like track of the postman's bicycle, she stands there "hot as fever/ And cold as any icicle," sensations which testify to the extremes of the dissociated sensibility as the girl is torn between an intellectual satisfaction in writing the letter and the heartbreak of ending the relationship. In contrast to the girl is the personified oak, symbol of the classic balance of reason and passion, "Who kept his peace in wind and sun, and glistened/ Stoical in the rain."

"Eclogue" (TGB), employing the dialogue method of narration seen in "Fall of Leaf" (CF), "Night Voices" (CF), and "Adventure This Side of Pluralism" (CF), matches two childhood friends and former lovers who try to explain the loss of youthful innocence and the spontaneity of love. The cause, they finally determine, is an awareness of death. As John Black (perhaps a play on the poet's own name) explains:

. . . Time involved us: in his toils
We learned to fear. And every day since then
We are mortals teasing for immortal spoils,
Desperate women and men.

Yet to John's pessimistic reflection of "Be sure/ That love has suffered a most fatal eclipse;/ All brotherhoods, filialities insecure" Jane Sneed imagines an ideal place (much like the narrator in "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom") where lovers who face death can "consort their little hands" until the sun of heaven comes and

They wake and laugh, their eyes again are blue,
And listen! are those not the doves, the thrushes?
Look there! the golden dew.

But to this romantic vision John Black, a disenchanter like the

narrator of "Vaunting Oak," replies in the last stanza:

O innocent dove,
 This is a dream. We lovers mournfully
 Exchange our bleak despairs. We are one part love
 And nine parts bitter thought. As well might be
 Beneath ground as above.

His proportion--one part love and nine of bitter thought--shows the direction of his dissociation of sensibility; his is the Abbott mind that has overdominated and upset the mind-body balance. This notion of the usurpation of body has, as noted in Chapter III, been a major theme in both Ransom's critical and Agrarian writing. Brooks writes that the predicament of the ex-lovers of "Eclogue" (the title itself ironically suggests the contrast between the mythic past and the devalued present) "is a symbol of the predicament of a scientific civilization"⁶³ with its madness for ordering even inscrutable human mysteries into abstraction and principle. The very fact that these two who formerly could love each other engage in a dialectic polemic on the loss of a capacity for love is elegant and ironic testimony to their own victimization by the scientific civilization. Their assigning death as the cause of their loss is more excuse than reason, for the hedonist points to the same mortality for his aggressive carpe diem philosophy.

"Wintered Remembered" (CF) is a first-person narration by a lover involved in the dramatic situation. Unlike the other poems about love, the love in this poem seems healthy, the problem being the apparently unavoidable absence of the beloved. Another peculiarity is the intense sincerity and lack of ironic tone of the narrator. One is particularly reminded of the amorous Donne narrator in the concluding stanza in which Ransom displays what is probably his finest conceit:

Dear love, these fingers that had known your touch,
 And tied our separate forces first together,

Were ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,
 Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather.

Interestingly, the familiar hot and cold imagery pervades the poem.

The narrator says that because he is "Far from my cause, my proper heat and center" (i.e., his inamorata) he left his warm house and evaded his pain by going into the cold and freezing his heart's blood so that "It ran too small to spare one drop for dreaming." Perhaps it is pushing a thesis too far, but might not this conscious repression of the heart by coldness symbolically represent the dynamics of the mind's freezing out the legitimacy of body? Though the narrator's loss of his love in "Winter Remembered" is presumably temporary, a prolonged condition of absence might well create the typically inhibited and frustrated Ransom lovers such as Abbott and John Black.

"Hilda" (TGB), in double Italian sonnet form, has another "I" narrator involved in a frustrated love--frustrated this time, as in "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster," by death, which is personified as "the Estranger." The narrator is visited by the dead girl's spirit, one of an innumerable company of "blanched lepers crying, 'Do not spurn us.'" But, of course, the mortal narrator is unable to follow her as the spirits dissipate in smoke "smeared upon the skies." Not only is there in the poem the dualism of the living and the dead, but the theme of dissociation, though muted, again appears: the spiritual girl cannot meet the man of flesh. Seen in this manner the Estranger is less a personification of literal death as he is a symbol of the sort of dissociation of body and spirit that estranges the lovers. The narrator notes that Hilda's plaintive, lingering spirit "wreath[es] my roses with blue bitter dust," an apt image of how the spiritual mind unwittingly palls

over the passionate roses of the body.

With "Good Ships" (CF) begin several poems which more explicitly illustrate how love is inhibited by an excess of mind at the expense of body. An extended metaphor of ships (Ransom at his metaphysical best, says Knight⁶⁴), this sonnet describes the meeting of an ideally suitable couple, but the incipient love is checked:

A macaroon absorbed all her emotion;
His hue was ashy but an effect of ocean;
They exchanged the nautical technicalities.

The sympathetic narrator notes that the pair departed the tea apparently unaffected, but he speculates, as the Ransom narrator so often does as he picks up cues in the nuances of ordinary social situations:

Still there was a tremor that shook them, I should think,
Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport
And unto miserly merchant hulks converted.

The pejorative reference to the "miserly merchant hulks" is, naturally, consistent with Ransom's opposition to commercial values which he sees encroaching upon the healthy mind-body balance of Agrarianism.

"Parting at Dawn" (CF) is another sonnet rebuking the "coward heart" of a couple who have foregone love in the name of a misguided rationalism. In the sestet the slightly mocking but nonetheless saddened narrator looks on and predicts the future course of the lovers' stoic wisdom:

And then? O dear Sir, stumbling down the street,
Continue, till you come to wars and wounds;
Beat the air, Madam, till your house-clock sounds;
And if no Lethe flows beneath your casement,
And when ten years have not brought full effacement,
Philosophy was wrong, and you may meet.

"Spectral Lovers" (CF) continues the theme of love repressed by an overly great concern with rationalistic niceties. The very

"spectrality" of the lovers suggests an overbalance of mind (cf. the spirituality of "Hilda") and the deficiency of body. "Why should two lovers go frozen apart in fear?" asks the narrator, who once more uses the recurrent heat-cold imagery. Again, as in "Epitaph" (CF) and "Triumph" (CF), discussed on pages 48 and 49 in the previous chapter, Ransom uses martial imagery in referring to the lady's person: "Should the walls of her prison undefended yield/ And open her treasure to the first clamorous knight?" Though the woman seems eager enough and the time propitious, the man thinks too much; "mincing his steps," he is paralyzed by "considerations [which] pinched his heart/ Unfitly for his art." He sees love not in terms of a healthy, natural spontaneity but as a military triumph over a beautiful city, the very kind of exploitive use Ransom so often railed against in his prose writing.

Vivienne Koch suggests that the narrator may actually be the lover,⁶⁵ an idea which John Gorecki in an unpublished thesis develops along with the notion that the narrator himself (and, implicitly, Ransom too, in my view) suffers from the mind-body split:

The abrupt reference to 'me' in the last line causes a mild shock to the reader. The speaker, with a divided sensibility himself, projects his state of mind onto the pair of lovers who pass him in the mist. . . . That he is so apt at filling in the characters of the couple and producing speeches for them suggests strongly that, like the men in "Eclogue" and "Vaunting Oak," he is given to fathoming his nature but not performing it. The poignant sadness of the last two lines indicates his painful awareness of his unhappy state of being.⁶⁶

The climactic poem about unmarried, inhibited lovers--perhaps the climactic poem of all Ransom's work--is the undisputed masterpiece "The Equilibrists." Bringing together as it does the themes of irreconcilable dualisms, a vision of a perfect love and the destruction of this dream, dissociation of personality, and death, the poem comes as close

as any of Ransom's to stating the poet's own solution to the dilemmas of human existence.

Structurally, the first six stanzas present the situation of two superbly paired lovers who are inhibited by considerations of honor; again there is the characteristic martial imagery, though in this poem it is carefully reserved for the lady's head, "a gaunt tower" issuing cold words ("grey doves") in contrast to her body, "a white field ready for love." The forbidding doves, "too wise, too pure," (here is the mocking condemnation of stoicism seen in "parting at Dawn") say to the man, "Leave me now, and never let us meet,/ Eternal distance now commend thy feet," an intonation of Old Testament thou-shalt-not.

In the seventh stanza the narrator appears. In a fine little conceit he likens the lovers to twin giant binary stars and employs once more and exploits to advantage the heat-cold, chills and fever imagery:

They burned with fierce love always to come near,
But honor beat them back and kept them clear.
.....
But still I watched them spinning, orbited nice.
Their flames were not more radiant than their ice.

The narrator also illustrates the lovers' painful dualistic choice in describing Heaven and Hell. No conventional moralist, the narrator observes that

In Heaven you have heard no marriage is,
No white flesh tinder to your lecheries,
Your male and female tissue sweetly shaped
Sublimed away, and furious blood escaped.

His description of Hell, though, seems equally unattractive:

Great lovers lie in Hell, the stubborn ones
Infatuate of the flesh upon the bones;
Stuprate, they rend each other when they kiss,
The pieces kiss again, no end to this.

What the Heaven-Hell metaphor boils down to is the old mind-body dualism again, only this time cast in technological rather than astronomical terms. By the nature of things the lovers cannot have both Heaven and Hell, Platonic and physical love, mind and body--the cards of mortality are stacked against them.

Bernard Bergonzi, the author of a fine essay on the poem, notes that

The narrator sympathizes with the human plight of the lovers, but he is not partisan; his own ethical position is that of a sad and resigned acceptance of a conventional morality.⁶⁷

While I should agree that the narrator is not partisan, I would argue that this English critic rather oversimplifies the narrator's attitude in saying that he makes a "sad and resigned acceptance of conventional morality." As in "Dead Boy," the experience of the poem lies in the simultaneous recognition of several layers of experience, all of which the narrator perceives without making value judgment.

Basically, the poem presents three positions with each having its philosophic, moral, and aesthetic components. The first may be called the position of rationalistic Honor with its corollaries of mind, abstraction, ideal essence, science, and logic. Another position is that of body, passion, concreteness, particularity, texture--the things that differentiate men from machines. The narrator, I think, can see the attractiveness of both positions. Yet the poem presents a third view, the position of the equilibrists, who are arrested between passion and honor and live a torturous existence worse than death or heaven or hell. In their equilibrium they portray "the paralyzed force, the gesture without motion" of Eliot's "Hollow Men." Both poems show the dissociation of thought and feeling in modern man, and both use the image of

sexual paralysis for expressing this theme. The narrator's final attitude in the poem seems to be a retreat from a moral judgment at all; in standing back and watching the "perilous and beautiful" lovers he makes only an aesthetic response much as one might contemplate the beauty of a pearl tortured into existence by a pathology. The only comfort offered is the bleak observation that "A kinder saeculum begins with Death." The Ransom narrator typically is not an optimist, certainly, and certainly he is not a romantic pessimist nor a prophet of existential despair. Nor is he the Christian martyr or the naturalistic positivist. He is a humanist, "shaken; but not as a leaf," as he tells us in "Agitato ma non troppo," one whose view of life has taken, like Wordsworth's, "a sober coloring from an eye/ That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality." Also, Ransom's view is somewhat like Samuel Johnson's, who found in life "little to be enjoyed and much to be endured."

The concluding five poems deal with problems of lovers in marriage. "In Process of a Noble Alliance" (CF), only eight lines long, returns to the theme of "Triumph" (CF), "Two Sonnets" (CF), and "Husband Betrayed" (TGB), i.e., physical possession but souls unmet. The narrator issues five sadly ironic imperatives to "celebrate" the arranged marriage, the last of which associates, as Ransom so often does, women with birds and death with unfulfilled love: "A dirge then for her beauty, musicians!/ Not harping the springe that catches the dove,"

"Lady Lost" (TGB) is another extended metaphor that speaks of a lady who has quarreled with her husband in terms of a distressed bird seeking refuge at the narrator and his wife's home. The narrator acts as a paternal and gentlemanly intermediary, going into the park and

admonishing her mate to

. . . stroke her gently
 With loving words, and she will evidently
 Return to her full soft-haired white-breasted fashion
 And her right home and her right passion.

"Two in August" (TGB), which lacks an explicit narrator, also is about a quarreling couple--"he of the wide brows that were used to laurel" and she "famed for gentleness"--both of whom for unfathomable reasons interrupt their usual compatibility by awaking at night angry with one another. With the woman "Circuiting the dark rooms" and the man "tread[ing] barefooted the dim lawn," the unpleasant disruption of harmony is reflected by the birds "crying/ With fear upon their tongues, no singing or flying." As observed in the discussion of "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom" and "What Ducks Require," birds in Ransom often represent the ideal of harmony with nature. The poem's last stanza comments that "Whether those bird cries were of heaven or hell/ There is no way to tell," another indication that the poet, as in "The Equilibrists," regards either heaven or hell alone (i.e., mind or body alone) as undesirable since either alone upsets the harmony and puts "tigers in their blood."

The temporary marital trouble of "Lady Lost" and "Two in August" becomes chronic in "Man Without Sense of Direction" (TGB), a poem which more than any other of Ransom's captures the frustration, alienation, fragmentation, and mental chaos of our times. Richmond Croom Beatty observes that this poem

. . . . is a vivid picture of the locked-in egoist, preyed upon by his own tortured mind. Moreover, it is one of Ransom's most serious poems. The familiar mocking wit which one associates with his diction is altogether absent from it. 68

The man without sense of direction, more vividly than any other Ransom character, exhibits the disastrous effect of the modern dissociated sensibility. Though "Of noblest mind and powerful leg," he "cannot fathom nor perform his nature." His basic problem which causes him to suffer is his "innocence," an inability to respond to "the world's body," to the "shapes that would fiddle upon his senses,/ Wings and faces and mists that move,/ Words, sunlight, the blue air. . ." Symptomatic of that basic failure is his lack of passionate allegiance to anything--"Rage have I none, cause, time, nor country"--for loyalties, one would surmise, are made in the heart, an organ of body. But the most dramatic sign of his failure is his inability to love his wife, in bridal the loveliest," and he tries vainly to restore his weak manhood with "small passion feigned large." Ransom depicts the man as an Orestes-like figure: "And he writhes like an antique man of bronze/ That is beaten by furies invisible" whose fate is willed by "invidious gods." Those gods are, of course, the gods without thunder Ransom speaks of in his prose, the principles of an intellectual scientism that have replaced the thunderous animistic divinities which kept man aware of a sacramental view of nature and the awe and beauty of body.

"Prelude to an Evening," which first appeared in the May, 1934 American Review, has two versions in the 1963 Selected Poems just as does "Conrad in Twilight" ("Master's in the Garden Again"). The later version is substantially the same except that to the original nine stanzas four new stanzas and an accompanying eleven page commentary have been added, all of which Buffington makes trenchant comment upon at length.⁵⁴ The situation in both versions is of a bedraggled husband, a victim of the rat-race and a divided sensibility, imagining a

speech that he will make to his wife who is deficient in understanding his "infected wound" and the "images of an invaded mind," but who is nevertheless disturbed by her husband's behavior. Buffington believes that the new version with its happy ending (the narrator decides to suppress his tragic dissatisfaction and join his children in storytime) seems an inartistic capitulation to a woman critic who attacked the "I" narrator of the poem for his monstrous attitudes; Buffington also feels that not only thematically but also stylistically the later version is inferior, having

a choppiness and prosiness that are almost anti-style as though the poet were not only impatient of all but his abstract meaning, but even a little distrustful of the graces that once composed his style.⁶⁹

What is interesting about the revision and the essay that follows it (the original poem and its revision are both perhaps somewhat below the middling mark in quality) is Ransom's defensive reaction and his elaborate defense of the conversion of the narrator in the revision. What one might conclude is that Ransom himself was emotionally involved in the original version's narrator. It is as if Ransom too much reveals his own sensibility, as if that often thinly-disguised autobiographical strain seen in Poems About God and which is never really subdued throughout the mature work uneasily breaks forth here in the final poem of what is probably the last volume the poet himself will compile; and neither the plaster of the new stanzas nor the erudition-studded prose can hide the poet's presence in the poem.

In commenting upon Ransom's preference for the more traditional kind of poetry which combines moral and aesthetic effects instead of rigorously separating them as do many twentieth century poets, Knight makes a rather incidental comment which, in the light of a close reading

of Ransom's poetry, seems profound. "Perhaps," he writes of Ransom, "the poetic act has been an important means in his own experience of combating dissociation in this age."⁷⁰

To what has already been said about the narrator in the earlier chapters, I should add that when Ransom's inferential narrator is himself directly involved in the dramatic situation, he betrays the same sort of vulnerability of the dissociated personality that is evident in the characters he describes as the objective outsider narrator. In other words, when Ransom's narrator is operating in the romantic tradition of direct involvement, he generally is, as revealed by "Old Man Pondered" (SP), "Plea in Mitigation" (CF), "Vanity of the Bright Young Men" (CF, SP), and "Miller's Daughter" (TGB), the same sort of failure as are the objectively described characters of "Two in August" (TGB, SP), "Man Without Sense of Direction" (TGB, SP), and "Philomela" (CF, SP). Ransom's romantic narrators are thus victims of dramatic irony because, unlike the Wordsworthian or Shelleyan personae, they lack the transcendental vision that fuses the disparate fragments into a monistic whole. On the other hand, the more typical and more effective Ransom narrator is one who, like those in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," "Dead Boy," and "The Equilibrists," can only come to terms with an experience by approaching it as an outsider who looks in, describes the externals of what he sees, becomes vicariously involved, and projects imaginatively what seems to him to be all the complex values of the situation.

To do this assumes values in conflict, and out of such conflict arises the poet's irony, which he uses in at least three ways: first,

it insulates the narrator from an overly-emotional sentimental involvement; secondly, it mediates between the warring contrarieties of the narrator's own dissociated sensibility; and finally, it enables him to explore intellectual aspects of the situation. For what Ransom's poetic narrator tries to do is to strike the harmonious balance (one might even say the classic) between the intellectual and the emotional, the mind and body--to try to heal as much as possible the old historical and psychological rift.

In struggling to represent the contrarieties of existence Ransom perhaps dealt more honestly, more directly than two of his esteemed contemporaries; Ransom does not remove himself from confrontation and recede into private mythologies as does Yeats in some though not all his best poetry, nor does he juxtapose raw incongruities like Eliot without a serious attempt (usually ironic) at bringing them into a clearly defined dualistic tension. Ransom's technique of irony thus becomes something like the scar tissue of the wound that severed the monistic, romantic dream of Eden into perplexing and painful dualisms; it is the device which, while not resolving dilemmas, makes possible the relative repose of "Agitato ma non troppo," and, through art, offers the possibility of an aesthetic response to the plight of the modern mortal equilibrists.

FOOTNOTES

¹Donald Stauffer, "Portrait of the Critic-Poet as Equilibrist," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), p. 431.

²Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 90.

³John Bradbury, "Ransom as Poet," Accent, XI (Winter, 1951), p. 52.

⁴Robert Penn Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XI (January, 1935), p. 94ff.

⁵The term seems first to have been used by T. S. Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets," an essay readily available in Eliot's Selected Essays: 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), pp. 241-250.

⁶Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Spring, 1950), p. 260.

⁷John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), p. 167.

⁸Howard Nemerov, "Summer's Flare and Winter's Flaw," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 421-422.

⁹The phrase is Vivienne Koch's from the essay cited above, p. 229.

¹⁰For a study of the poet's alterations of his selected work, see David Mann and Samuel H. Woods', Jr. "John Crowe Ransom's Poetic Revisions," PMLA, LXXXIII (June, 1968), pp. 15-21.

¹¹Isabel Gamble, "Ceremonies of Bravery: John Crowe Ransom," Southern Renaissance, ed. Louis Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 341.

¹²John Stewart, The Burden of Time (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 218.

¹³Richmond Croom Beatty, "John Crowe Ransom as Poet," Sewanee Review, LIII (Summer, 1944), p. 353.

¹⁴John Crowe Ransom, God Without Thunder (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), p. 320.

- ¹⁵Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist: A Study of the Poems of John Crowe Ransom (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press), p. 42.
- ¹⁶Delmore Schwartz, "Instructed of Much Mortality," Sewanee Review, LIV (Summer, 1946), pp. 441-442.
- ¹⁷Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Roy Publishers, 1952), p. 62.
- ¹⁸Stewart, p. 228.
- ¹⁹Graham Hough, "John Crowe Ransom: The poet and the Critic," Southern Review, I (January, 1965), p. 15.
- ²⁰Buffington, p. 75.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²²Stewart, p. 251.
- ²³Buffington, p. 57.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ²⁶Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1964), p. 92.
- ²⁷Buffington, p. 24.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.
- ²⁹John Stewart, John Crowe Ransom (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 18 [Minneapolis, 1962]), p. 14.
- ³⁰John Bradbury, The Fugitives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 30.
- ³¹Knight, p. 52.
- ³²Buffington, p. 93.
- ³³Hough, p. 20. The dynamics of how Ransom makes a "workable poetic convention" out of the American heritage is made explicit in the Woods' article cited below which points out that the poet improvises his own myths and validates his metaphors as he goes along.
- ³⁴Buffington, p. 89.
- ³⁵Samuel H. Woods, Jr., "'Philomela': John Crowe Ransom's Ars Poetica," College English, XXVII (February, 1966), p. 410.

- ³⁶Knight, p. 114.
- ³⁷A late revision of this poem appeared in the Sewanee Review, LXXV (Summer-Autumn, 1967), pp. 634-635.
- ³⁸Brooks, p. 91.
- ³⁹Stewart, John Crowe Ransom, p. 30.
- ⁴⁰This change is the only revision in the selected poems which appears to make any substantive difference in the narrator technique.
- ⁴¹John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 101.
- ⁴²Beatty, p. 355.
- ⁴³Gamble, p. 343.
- ⁴⁴Cleanth Brooks, Conversations on the Craft of Poetry (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 21.
- ⁴⁵Knight, p. 101.
- ⁴⁶Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 235.
- ⁴⁷Buffington, p. 57.
- ⁴⁸Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 93.
- ⁴⁹Hough, p. 12.
- ⁵⁰Knight, p. 35.
- ⁵¹Stewart, John Crowe Ransom, p. 30.
- ⁵²Buffington, p. 63.
- ⁵³Ibid., p. 54.
- ⁵⁴Thornton Parsons, "The Civilized Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," Perspective, XIII, (Autumn, 1964), p. 251.
- ⁵⁵Fred H. Stocking, "Ransom's 'Here Lies a Lady,'" Explicator, VIII (October, 1949), Item 1.
- ⁵⁶Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 402.
- ⁵⁷Bradbury, The Fugitives, p. 37.
- ⁵⁸Buffington, p. 61.
- ⁵⁹Knight, p. 68.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 109.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 108.

⁶²Ibid., p. 80.

⁶³Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 90.

⁶⁴Knight, p. 62.

⁶⁵Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," p. 241.

⁶⁶John Gorecki, "John Crowe Ransom's Characters: Portrayals of the Dissociated Sensibility" (unpub. M.A. thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1968), pp. 45-46.

⁶⁷Bernard Bergonzi, "A Poem About the History of Love," Critical Quarterly, IV (Summer, 1962), p. 134.

⁶⁸Beatty, p. 358.

⁶⁹Buffington, p. 114.

⁷⁰Knight, p. 73.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis examines John Crowe Ransom's use of the narrator device in his poetry. Though perhaps in three-fourths of Ransom's poetry a first person narrator appears, scholarship has made only a few brief references to the device. Yet Ransom has, one might conclude, deliberately sought to emphasize the narrator's role by basing his poems "often on a kind of narrative situation. . .that the prose fictionist could work with"¹ and by keying his work to "a speaking rather than a singing voice."²

The study confines itself to all of Ransom's poetry published in books; these include Poems About God (1919), Chills and Fever (1924), Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927), and the three selected and revised collections which contain only seven entirely new poems--Selected Poems (1945), Poems and Essays (1955), and Selected Poems (1963). Because of certain confusions arising from the closely related word persona, this study uses the term inferential narrator to denote the narrator device.

The introductory chapter points out a basic thesis developed throughout the study that the narrator and the poet himself often speak with much the same voice. In the early Poems About God the poet is generally naively identified with his material, but in his mature work he develops a more sophisticated aesthetic and ironic distance which puts him more in the modernist than the romantic tradition. However,

the place at which Ransom applies aesthetic and ironic distance is different from much modernist practice, for he usually puts it between the narrator and the dramatic situation, thus making the reader's total experience of the poem very much the same as the narrator's experience of the dramatic situation. The Ransom narrator, at least in the better poems, is thus not often a victim of dramatic irony, and a pleasant bond develops between narrator and reader.

From both his poetic practice and his later critical comments it is clear that Ransom favors an intermediate position with regard to a poetic narrator which is somewhere between the romantic poet-"I" identification and the virtually complete depersonalization of some modernists such as Eliot in Four Quartets.

A major characteristic of the Ransom narrator once beyond Poems About God is his unwillingness to do more than merely suggest value judgments; this cannot be considered intellectual ineffectuality as much as it is intellectual integrity, a weighing of many complex attitudes and moods into a multivalent equilibrium. Also, the narrator, like his creator, is very much a teacher, often of "much mortality" as in the poem "Vaunting Oak"; in the narrator's intellectual temperament, his allusions to classical and biblical literature, his focusing on very limited situations and probing them in depth from several perspectives are seen evidence of an almost ironic pedantry. Add to these qualities the often encountered professorial traits of wryness, irony, wit, and a retiring personality, and the dangerous temptation to slip from the personality of persona to the biography of Ransom the poet-scholar-teacher becomes great. The typical Ransom poem thus does not focus on the subject in dramatic movement, but rather on the subject as

experienced by the narrator, caught often at a moment of crisis as if in a frieze, and filtered through the wry, ironic, sensitive, sympathetic, though somewhat ambivalent consciousness of the narrator.

Chapter II deals with Ransom's first volume of verse, Poems About God, none of which the poet has seen fit to include in his selected collections. The book shows a wide range in craftsmanship, with two or three of the poems bearing something of Ransom's best style. One might say that in Poems About God Ransom was searching for his authentic voice, that he experimented, though probably not very consciously, with a whole spectrum of narrative voices ranging from a close relationship of the poet and narrator to the opposite extreme of nearly complete depersonalization in which no narrator appears.

The poems are divided into seven classes according to the kind of narrator used; they are (1) the narrator as boy, (2) the narrator as angry young man, (3) the narrator as young lover, (4) the narrator as young man instructed, (5) the narrator as objective commentator, (6) the narrator clearly unidentified with the poet, (7) no explicit narrator presence.

The use of the narrator device in Poems About God suggests that the naive direct handling in the earlier groups gives way to the more sophisticated technique in group six, the objective commentator, which proves to be Ransom's most effective mode in his subsequent poetry.

Parallel to this growth in narrative handling is the development of a subtle irony, that hallmark of Ransom's mature style. Also, the groups show a changing attitude toward God, with the latter groups gentler and predicated more on an acceptance of the way things are than the often bitter irony of the angry young man of the first groups.

The third chapter analyzes the "unselected" poems--those poems in Chills and Fever and Two Gentlemen in Bonds which Ransom has not chosen for republication in the selected editions. With a few exceptions, they are of an intermediate quality between Poems About God and the selected work. The unselected poems also give the impression that the poet still is struggling for his most effective mode of expression, and parallel to this search is an exploration for a personal philosophic viewpoint which can find expression in a technique. The development of Ransom's style is largely the history of the development of his own kind of ironic dualism out of an earlier romantic stage, a growth documented in Ransom's Fugitive essay quoted at length in the chapter.

The bulk of the unselected poems represent a narrative presence which is moving from the latter stages of a romantic viewpoint to an ironic-dualism; often the poems suggest that the narrator is a reluctant dualist who looks wistfully back to romantic monism. Too, the unselected poems lack the full-blown irony of the selected poems, the romantic and ironic modes being mutually exclusive.

The narrator of the selected poems, it is argued, displays the delicate balancing of dualistic oppositions on the finely balanced fulcrum of an ironic perception, with a nearly perfect poising and counterpoising of tensions. As has already been observed, most of the unselected poems show a narrator in the early stages of an ironic dualism, but several of the unselected poems, notably "Nocturne" and the "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" sequence are at an opposite extreme and provide evidence of dualisms so dissociated by a breakdown of a romantic impulse to unify experience that even the restorative of irony fails to bridge the gap.

As in the second chapter, the unselected poems are grouped in a manner that represents a progression from a heavy presence of the poet in the poem to depersonalized methods. These groups are: (1) narrator as angry young man, (2) protest poems that criticize the order of the moral and social establishment, (3) poems about love, (4) poems about "the mythic past and the devalued present," (5) quasi-autobiographical poems, (6) narrator as objective commentator, (7) poems employing dramatic monologue and dialogue, (8) poems without a narrative presence written in what may be called simple narrative. These groupings, of course, are not presented here or in the other chapters as necessarily mutually exclusive categories, but are useful for purposes of discussion.

In the poems of the protest group the narrator, unlike his practice in Poems About God, centers his irony on the human situation with theological values fairly submerged. The unselected love poems, as in the selected ones, show a lack of passionate fulfillment which often grows into a bitterness that sees frustrated love and death in the same terms.

The poems of the quasi-autobiographical group are the highest of quality among the unselected work, the narrator here being the most sophisticated. The autobiographical personality here is similar to that of many of Ransom's best narrators in the selected poems; he is a shy, self-conscious, bookish figure, aggressively intellectual, even vain in his independence of thought, but socially defensive, something of an outcast (at least in the unselected poems), and particularly unable to articulate feelings of love, yet nonetheless longing to give up the lonely holding out and to return to the society which cannot understand

him.

There is a fundamental paradox in Ransom's poetry that it is only when the poet, through his narrator, is in the poem that Ransom achieves his most effective aesthetic and ironic distance. In all his poetry to a degree--but particularly in those which are fairly obviously autobiographical such as "Plea in Mitigation" and "Philomela"--it would seem that the poet is struggling to come to terms with his own experience through ironic self-examination.

In the relative failure of those several poems which show a dissociation of the finely balanced mind-body dualism is the signalling of the decline of Ransom's poetic productivity. Ransom's long poetic twilight since 1927, the date of publication of Two Gentlemen in Bonds, has resulted in much revision of his old poems but only a handful of new ones. Even these so-called "later" poems have a strongly intellectualist strain that shows that the direction of the Ransom narrator has continued to move toward the Abbott personality and away from the old harmonious mind-body balance of the heady Fugitive era.

In Chapter IV the best of Ransom's work is examined, the poems which he and critics generally agree are his finest. These poems from the 1963 edition of Selected Poems (which contains all the poems plus some others contained in the 1945 and 1955 collections) illustrate the typical dramatic situation of Ransom's poetry: the ironic perception of the futile motions of characters caught in life's dualistic equilibriums.

The poems are discussed in thematic groups rather than groups determined principally by narrator technique because in the selected poems the objective narrator, whether as an explicit "I" or an implicit

presence, is all but exclusively employed. These four groups are the following: (1) poems dealing with various irreconcilable dualisms, (2) poems exhibiting "the devalued present and the mythic past," (3) poems about death and decay, (4) poems about lovers. These groups may be seen in a sequential perspective: the governing concept of all Ransom's thinking is dualism; there is then the perception of the fundamental disparity between the real and the ideal, the way things are and the way they might have been; the fruit of this "devalued present" is, logically, decay and death of both soul and body; and finally, it is in the experience of love, or rather in the experience of the failure of love, that the devalued present and the soul's death are most poignantly felt.

Though the predominant Ransom narrator is an objective commentator in the selected poems, several poems have a narrator who is subjectively involved ("Spectral Lovers," "Old Man Pondered," for instance). When the narrator is himself thus involved, he too shows characteristics of the dissociated sensibility and becomes a victim of dramatic irony.

For the more typical objective commentator who stands outside the dramatic situation and shares with the reader much of the total experience of the poem, irony functions in at least three ways: it insulates the narrator from an overly sentimental involvement; it mediates between the warring contrarieties of the narrator's own dissociated sensibility; and it enables the narrator to explore intellectual aspects of the situation.

As Vivienne Koch observes, Ransom's poetry becomes "an instrument for the assimilation and the ordering of failure into an endurable scheme of existence"³--in short, through the poetic narrator the poet and his reader can, by the ministry of art, strike something of the

harmonious balance between the intellectual and the emotional, the mind and the body, and heal in a measure the wound of the dissociated sensibility. Viewed in this perspective, Ransom's narrator becomes a means not only of unifying the sensibility, but also of unifying all of Ransom's poetry, for the several narrator strategies with which Ransom experiments actually reveal one voice, one personality seeking a philosophic perspective with which to come to terms with experience in such a way as to explore maximally all the values and attitudes of the richness of the world's body. That Ransom achieved success in this quest is testified to by the consummate artistry of the objective narrator in such poems as "The Equilibrists," "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," "Blue Girls," and "Dead Boy."

FOOTNOTES

¹Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 8.

²F. O. Matthiessen, "Primarily Language," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), p. 395.

³Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (Spring, 1950), p. 260.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altenbernd, Lynn and Leslie L. Lewis. A Handbook for the Study of Poetry. New York: Macmillan, 1966.
- Beatty, Richmond Croom. "John Crowe Ransom As Poet." Sewanee Review, LII (Summer, 1944), pp. 344-366.
- Bergonzi, Bernard. "A Poem About the History of Love." Critical Quarterly, IV (Summer, 1962), pp. 127-137.
- Bornhauser, Fred W. "Disowned Progeny: The Early Poems of John Crowe Ransom." (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1966).
- Bradbury, John. The Fugitives: A Critical Account. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1958.
- _____. "Ransom As Poet." Accent, XI (Winter, 1951), pp. 45-57.
- _____. Renaissance in the South. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963.
- Brooks, Cleanth, et al. Conversations on the Craft of Poetry. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1961.
- _____. "The Doric Delicacy." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 402-415.
- _____. Modern Poetry and the Tradition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939.
- Buffington, Robert R. The Equilibrist: A Study of the Poems of John Crowe Ransom, 1916-1963. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967.
- Campbell, Harry Modean. "Myth As Self-Conscious Illusion: Ransom's God Without Thunder." Mississippi Quarterly, XX (Winter, 1966-67), pp. 1-12.
- Cowan, Louise. The Fugitive Group: A Literary History. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1959.
- Davidson, Donald. Southern Writers in the Modern World. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958.

- Ewald, William Bragg, Jr. The Masks of Jonathan Swift. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1954.
- Frye, Northrup. Anatomy of Criticism: Form Essays. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957.
- The Fugitive, I-IV (April, 1922-December, 1925) Gloucester, Mass.; Peter Smith, 1967.
- Fussell, Paul, Jr. Poetic Meter and Poetic Form. New York: Random House, 1965.
- Gamble, Isabel. "Ceremonies of Bravery: John Crowe Ransom," Southern Renascence, ed. Louis Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953, pp. 341-351.
- Gorecki, John E. "John Crowe Ransom's Characters: Portrayals of the Dissociated Sensibility." (unpub. thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1968).
- Hall, Vernon. "Ransom's 'Captain Carpenter.'" Explicator, XXVI (November, 1967), Item 28.
- Hoffman, Frederick, Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich. The Little Magazine. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1946.
- Hough, Graham. "John Crowe Ransom: The Poet and the Critic." Southern Review, I (January, 1965), pp. 1-21.
- Jarrell, Randall. "John Ransom's Poetry." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 378-390.
- Kelly, Richard. "Ransom's 'Captain Carpenter.'" Explicator, XXV (March, 1967), Item 57.
- Knight, Karl Frederick. The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom; A Study of Diction, Metaphor, and Symbol. The Hague: Mouton, 1964.
- Koch, Vivienne. "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom." Sewanee Review, LVIII (Spring, 1950), pp. 227-261.
- _____. "The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom." Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan. New York: Roy Publishers, 1952, pp. 33-65.
- Lytle, Andrew. "Note and Traditional Sensibility." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 370-373.
- Mack, Maynard. "The Muse of Satire." Yale Review, XLI (Autumn, 1951), pp. 80-92.
- Mann, David and Samuel H. Woods, Jr. "John Crowe Ransom's Poetic Revisions." PMLA, LXXXIII (June, 1968), pp. 15-21.

- Matthiessen, F. O. "Primarily Language." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 391-401.
- Mitchell, Charles. "Ransom's Little Boy Blue." Explicator, XXII (September, 1963), Item 5.
- Mizener, Arthur. [Untitled Review of Ransom's Selected Poems.] Quarterly Review of Literature, II (No. 4, 1945), pp. 366-370.
- Moorman, Charles. "Ransom's Painted Head." Explicator, X (December, 1951), Item 15.
- Nemerov, Howard. "Summer's Flare and Winter's Flaw." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 416-425.
- Osborn, Scott C. "Ransom's 'Blue Girls.'" Explicator, XXI (November, 1962), Item 22.
- Parkin, Rebecca Price. The Poetic Workmanship of Alexander Pope. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955.
- Parsons, Thornton. "The Civilized Poetry of John Crowe Ransom." Perspective, XIII (Autumn, 1964), p. 251.
- Parsons, Thornton. "Ransom and the Poetics of Monastic Ecstasy." Modern Language Quarterly, XXVI (December, 1965), pp. 571-585.
- Peck, Virginia. "Ransom's 'Prelude to an Evening.'" Explicator, XX (January, 1962), Item 41.
- Pratt, William. The Fugitive Poets. New York: Dutton, 1965.
- Pritchard, John Paul. Criticism in America. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956.
- Purdy, Rob Roy, ed. Fugitives' Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1959.
- Ransom, John Crow. "Characters and Character." American Review, VI (January, 1936), pp. 271-288.
- _____. Chills and Fever. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1924.
- _____. God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930.
- _____. The Kenyon Critics. Cleveland: World, 1951.
- _____. The New Criticism. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941.
- _____. Poems About God. New York: Henry Holt, 1919.

- _____. Poems and Essays. New York: Random House, 1955.
- _____. "Reconstructed But Unregenerate." I'll Take My Stand by Twelve Southerners. New York: Peter Smith, 1951, pp. 1-27.
- _____. Selected Poems. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1945.
- _____. Selected Poems. 2nd rev. and enl. ed., New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963.
- _____. "Strategy for English Studies." Southern Review, VI (Autumn, 1940), pp. 226-235.
- _____. "The Teaching of Poetry." Kenyon Review, I (Winter, 1939), pp. 81-83.
- _____. Two Gentlemen in Bonds. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1927.
- _____. The World's Body. New York: Scribner's, 1938.
- Sanders, Gerald Dewitt, John Nelson, and M. L. Rosenthal, eds. Chief Modern Poets of England and America. 4th ed., New York: Macmillan, 1962.
- Schorer, Mark. "Technique As Discovery." Hudson Review, I (Spring, 1948), pp. 67-87.
- Schwartz, Delmore. "Instructed of Much Mortality." Sewanee Review, LIV (Summer, 1946), pp. 439-448.
- Schwartz, Elias. "Ransom's 'Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter.'" English Language Notes, I (June, 1964), pp. 284-285.
- Snipes, Katherine W. "Ransom's 'Two in August.'" Explicator, XXVI (October, 1967), Item 15.
- Stauffer, Donald. "Portrait of the Critic-Poet As Equilibrist." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 426-434.
- Stevens, Wallace. "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), pp. 367-369.
- Stewart, John Lincoln. The Burden of Time. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1965.
- _____. John Crowe Ransom (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 18 [Minneapolis, 1962]).
- Stocking, Fred H. and Ellsworth Mason. "Ransom's 'Here Lies a Lady.'" Explicator, VIII (October, 1949), Item 1.
- Stork, Charles. [Untitled Review of Poems About God.] Yale Review, IX (April, 1920), pp. 660-667.

- Untermeyer, Louis. [Untitled review of Chills and Fever.] Yale Review, XIV (July, 1925), pp. 791-797.
- Vivas, Eliseo. "The Self and Its Masks." Southern Review, I (April, 1965), pp. 317-336.
- Waggoner, Hyatt H. "Ransom's 'Blue Girls.'" Explicator, XVIII (October, 1959), Item 6.
- Wallach, Virginia. "Ransom's 'Painted Head.'" Explicator, XIV (April, 1956), Item 45.
- Warren, Robert Penn. "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony." Virginia Quarterly Review, XI (January, 1935), pp. 93-112.
- _____. "Pure and Impure Poetry." Kenyon Review, V (Spring, 1943), pp. 228-254.
- Wasserman, G. R. "The Irony of John Crowe Ransom." Kansas City Review, XXIII (Winter, 1956), pp. 151-360.
- Wellek, Rene and Austin Warren. Theory of Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942.
- Williamson, George. "Donne and the Poetry of Today." A Garland of John Donne, ed. Theodore Spencer. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931, pp. 153-176.
- Woods, Samuel H., Jr. "Philomela: John Crowe Ransom's Ars Poetica." College English, XXVII (February, 1966), pp. 408-413.
- Wright, George T. The Poet in the Poem: The Personae of Eliot, Yeats, and Pound. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- Young, Thomas Daniel, ed. John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968.

VITA 3

Donald David Duffy, Jr.

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: THE INFERENTIAL NARRATOR IN THE POETRY OF JOHN CROWE RANSOM

Major Field: Higher Education

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Chicago, Illinois, February 15, 1939, the son of Mary Jane and Donald David Duffy; married May 31, 1959, to Annette Cook; son, Michael David, born May 22, 1960; daughter, Jane Annette, born February 8, 1963.

Education: Graduated from Putnam City High School, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1956; attended University of Oklahoma, 1956-1957; received Bachelor of Arts in Education degree from Central State College, Edmond, Oklahoma, in 1960 with a major in English; received the Master of Arts degree with a major in English from Oklahoma State University in 1963; attended the summer session at Kansas State University, 1965; attended University of Oklahoma during the 1966-1967 academic year; completed requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at Oklahoma State University, August, 1969.

Professional Experience: Graduate teaching assistant, English department, Oklahoma State University, 1960-1961 and 1962-1963; instructor, Imperial Valley High School, Imperial California; instructor, Central State College, 1963; instructor, Panhandle State College, Goodwell, Oklahoma, 1963-1966; graduate teaching assistant, English department, University of Oklahoma, 1966-1967; half-time instructor, English department, Oklahoma State University, 1967-1969.